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SOPHY BUNCE

THOMAS COBB

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SOPHY BUNCE

SOPHY BUNCE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE INTRIGUERS.
CARPET COURTSHIP.
MR. PASSINGHAM.
THE DISSEMBLERS.
SEVERANCE.
SCRUPLES.
THE BISHOP'S GAMBIT.
LADY GWENDOLINE.
A MAN OF SENTIMENT.
THE HEAD OF THE HOUSEHOLD.
THE COMPOSITE LADY.
A CHANGE OF FACE.
THE JUDGMENT OF HELEN.
MRS. BELFORT'S STRATAGEM.
ETC. ETC.

SOPHY BUNCE

BY

THOMAS COBB

AUTHOR OF "MRS. BELFORT'S STRATAGEM"



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SOPHY BUNCE

CHAPTER I

SOPHY

MRS. BUNCE looked unusually melancholy as she stood beside her basket of daffodils at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, where for many years she had been a familiar object to passers-by.

Some who did not buy her flowers—"Sweet, fresh flowers, gentleman!"—bestowed coppers, and, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Bunce seldom failed to earn sufficient for the day if not for the morrow. The weather made no difference, save in the amount of her receipts; neither rain nor wind nor snow kept the old woman from her post, and exposure had tanned her face as brown as a nut.

Long ago, in girlhood, she must have been beautiful; she was, indeed, beautiful still in her

A

old age : with snow-white hair, bright blue eyes and strong, regular, clearly cut features. Above her black dress a checkered red shawl was crossed over her ample bosom ; her dinner, wrapped in an old piece of newspaper, was hidden under the daffodils at the bottom of her large basket, beside a flat glass bottle—for life would have seemed a dull affair without a daily modicum of gin.

Mrs. Bunce's busiest hours were in the late afternoons, when housewives from Camden Town changed omnibuses near her corner on the way home from the Stores, and men passed from the City ; but during long spells of slackness, whiling the time by reminiscences, she became a girl again in the Sussex village of her birth, courtship, and marriage, or she once more rued the day when she left her cottage with its sweet garden for a London slum. There two boys were born, to be buried, alas ! in the gruesome cemetery, where their father had since been laid.

Their sister Nancy, the child of Mrs. Bunce's age, the pride and the great sorrow of her life, had not outlived her shame, and so the grandmother, already growing old, had been left quite alone with Sophy, who, until she grew too big, was brought out day after day with

the flower-basket, in which she would often be carried home at night.

Comparatively happy days those, when all anxieties concerning the child might be cured by a powder or a pill. But now the great dread of Mrs. Bunce's life was lest the daughter should follow in the mother's steps! Who the girl's father had been nobody knew, but Sophy possessed, even in a greater degree, the beauty which had been Nancy's ruin.

She was not merely a pretty girl of her class. Sophy's loveliness could scarcely be classified; and in a groping way Mrs. Bunce understood that wherever men did congregate, the child would become a power in the world. The old woman would stand against the palings, oblivious of the passing crowd and of the vileness that often surrounded her, muttering long prayers for Sophy's preservation.

Sophy was quick to learn, and especially to imitate; and Mrs. Bunce, dreading to see her go to shop or factory, had arranged that she should stay at school—a kind of pupil-teacher, taking the infants' class—until, about a week ago, at the age of fifteen and a half years, Sophy began to rebel. She liked to learn, while she hated teaching; moreover, she had an antipathy to one of her mistresses, and a

decided will of her own. She refused to remain another day at school, and at the present moment Sophy was looking vaguely for something to do.

But Mrs. Bunce's anxious expression this afternoon was not due entirely to her granddaughter. She told the young policeman at her corner that she really didn't know what was coming over her. She didn't feel well; she who had never known a day's illness in her life save when her children were born. Strange sensations had been creeping over her all that morning, and more than once she had fallen asleep at her post.

"Anno Domini," said the policeman, "that's what's the matter with you, mother!"—and she shook her head with a sigh, unable to dispute the truth of this too blunt diagnosis.

On the whole she had done a fair day's business, and at eight o'clock she trudged off with her basket towards Drury Lane, stopping for breath many times by the way, until at last the house was reached, where she and Sophy had shared a room for the last ten years or longer. Amongst other articles it contained a bed and the crib which had been the girl's sleeping-place as long as she could remember, eked out by a chair without a back.

Sophy stood on the threshold of life, and the door was scarcely open yet, but through the cracks and the keyhole, as it were, she could already obtain a peep, and wonder and wonder what marvellous things might exist on the farther side.

She did not hesitate to credit herself with uncommon characteristics, or otherwise Mrs. Bunce's continual admonitions must surely have been unnecessary. In a manner also she realised that knowledge was power, and she could not fail to perceive that she was far more highly educated than many girls of her class. Whilst her dreams certainly concerned her own aggrandisement, they were not sufficiently definite to be covetous. Supreme health and a natural gaiety of disposition, which was entirely independent of circumstances, created a desire to rise in the world, and Sophy often wished that she lived in the days of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid, whose adventures in a dilapidated book, the gift of one of her mistresses at the school, she never wearied of reading.

In Italy her grace of movement might not have been surprising, in London it could scarcely fail to be remarkable. Though her boots were clumsy, she seemed to glide silently

across the uncarpeted floor, and while all her attention soon became engrossed by Mrs. Bunce, she might have been posing for a sculptor as she wound an arm about the old woman's neck.

"What's the matter, Granny?"

"*I dunnow*," was the answer, as Mrs. Bunce sank on to the bed.

"Aren't you well?"

"Oh, I'm a stoopid old woman, dearie!"

"Nothing of the kind," said Sophy. "You're going to be my child, you know, and I shall put you to bed at once."

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Bunce lay shivering between the blankets, while Sophy stood staring at her wrinkled face, wondering what to give her to eat.

"Promise not to move until I come back," she cried presently; and taking a penny from the small pile of coppers on the mantel-shelf, Sophy selected a jug, which had only two pieces chipped out of the spout, and set forth to the nearest milk-shop.

That night she awoke to hear Granny talking in her sleep, an alarming experience, and the next morning Mrs. Bunce felt so extremely hot that Sophy consulted with Mrs. Draper upstairs, and afterwards fetched a doctor.

But a few days later she was confronted by a terrible predicament. The last penny had been spent, there was no food in the house, while Sophy knew that it would break Granny's heart to be removed to the infirmary. Without asking for Mrs. Draper's advice on the present occasion, she sat on her crib in the dark room far into the night, trying to think of some method to raise a few shillings. Early the next morning she rolled up her jacket, and hastening to the pawnbroker's round the corner left the shop with tingling cheeks and a half-crown—her heightened colour being due to the effrontery of the young man behind the counter.

On the way home Sophy bought some milk—the doctor had told her that no other food was desirable—and then, taking the large basket on her arm, set forth to Farringdon Market, where she had sometimes during her holidays been taken early in the morning by Mrs. Bunce. Though Sophy was an inexperienced marketer, she returned with a goodly number of fresh narcissus. Granny by this time was too near her end to pay the slightest attention to the fragrant basket, which Sophy stood on the cane-bottomed chair by the door, now and then sprinkling water over the flowers.

Having often heard that from four o'clock until eight was the best time for business, Sophy asked Mrs. Draper to go downstairs occasionally during her absence, and at half-past three she left the house. Her dress, dark since she had become a pupil-teacher, could not hide the lithesome charm of her almost boyish figure. Perhaps because of her love of colour, perhaps from an histrionic desire to dress suitably for her part, she had refolded Mrs. Bunce's checkered red shawl, crossed it over her chest, and tied it in a knot behind her waist.

Thanks also to the influence of the school, her dark-brown hair was not arranged according to the ornate fashion of the neighbourhood, being fastened, for convenience, in a kind of massive loop at the back of her neck, while short, curling tresses escaped in front of her cap—a grey, knitted thing of the Tam-o'-Shanter description, purchased for a few pence, but admirably becoming.

This was, indeed, not such a part as Sophy was accustomed to play in her numerous day-dreams, nor had she the remotest expectation that her beloved Caliph would chance to be walking near Tottenham Court Road this afternoon. She was making simply a valiant

little effort to obtain some food for Granny and then for herself, though even hunger did not prevent Sophy from feeling that she had distinctly come down in the world.

The large basket, its bottom well lined with old brown paper so that it might appear to be quite full of flowers, proved difficult to carry. First, she held it in her left hand, then in her right; for a few yards she tried to balance it on her head—a dismal failure! Nor did she reach the corner where she had sometimes come to speak to Granny without receiving many a glance of admiration; and, to tell the truth, Sophy felt gratified by such glances, and it was only when any one stopped in front of her that she had an inclination to run away.

Presently, she stood in the sunshine of the spring afternoon by the palings, and the youthful policeman—he is a sergeant now, and sometimes meets Sophy and touches his helmet—stopped to ask what had become of the old woman.

“Look here,” he said, “just you give her this,” when he heard of Mrs. Bunce’s illness, and he put into Sophy’s hand three pennies, which she could not afford to refuse. He showed a more welcome kindness in scattering

importunate loafers, and Sophy soon had her first customer.

Her earliest appearance in public proved a complete success; and when she had only four bunches of narcissus left, she forthwith doubled the price, charging twopence instead of a penny for each. As she had gone to work on the same simple principle from the outset, she returned home with a considerable profit; for, together with the recklessness which had alarmed Mrs. Bunce, there was an element of calculation in the girl. She was able to expend her original capital on necessities for herself and Granny, while retaining a larger sum for to-morrow's stock-in-trade.

So Sophy went on for a few days, meeting with many little kindnesses, some insults, but generally succeeding in disposing of the bulk of her flowers, and in this way providing for Mrs. Bunce's needs, while the old woman lay slowly but surely dying.

One afternoon Sophy became aware of a man who regarded her, as he passed her basket, with a scrutiny which yet had nothing in it offensive. Having crossed the road he hesitated, turned back, inquired the price of the flowers, bought three bunches, and gave her a shilling. Watching as he walked away,

Sophy saw him reach the farther side of the crossing, and quietly drop the narcissus into the gutter.

He was a tall, slimly-built man, and, although carrying himself fairly erect, his gait seemed careless. He had short dark hair and a moustache, and looked about the thronged street as if he liked to observe the passing show instead of being engrossed by his own reflections. His hat was a bowler, he carried a cane, and wore a darkish suit, the short jacket unbuttoned, one hand in his trousers pocket. He was a handsome man, with kindly eyes; Sophy liked his face, and while he obviously took an interest in her, it seemed to be a different kind of interest from that to which she was becoming accustomed of late.

She, however, forgot all about him a few minutes later, until they met once more on the following day. When she reached her corner at a few minutes before four o'clock, he was standing on the opposite curb, almost as if he had been awaiting her arrival. He stayed there while she supplied one or two customers, then, seeing that she was again disengaged, he crossed the road, stopping beside her basket.

"What flowers have you got to-day?" he asked, in a pleasant conversational tone.

"Why did you throw those away yesterday?" cried Sophy, raising her blue eyes to his face.

"Have you ever had your portrait painted?" he inquired, with a laugh.

Sophy shook her head.

"No," she answered gravely.

"Well, it's never too late to mend. I happen to be a painter, and if you would come to my house——"

"No, thank you," said Sophy.

"I only want you to sit for the head," he explained, "and you could earn more money than you can pick up here."

"How much?"

"Well, that could be arranged. Say three or four shillings in a morning."

"I only asked because I felt I should like to know," she answered; "but I shan't come."

After a momentary hesitation, he took a card from one of his waistcoat pockets, pencilling on it his address. Having given her this, he went away without buying any flowers, and as he climbed on to a moving omnibus, Sophy came to the conclusion that he must be younger than she had at first assumed. Acton Marsh was, in fact, thirty-three.

"What's the bloke been saying?" asked the

policeman, stopping beside the flower-basket a minute later.

"He says he's a painter."

"Artist, you mean?"

"Painter's what he said," Sophy insisted.

"Wanted you to sit for him, did he?"

"How did you know?" exclaimed Sophy.

"Never mind how I know," said the policeman; "I wasn't born yesterday. That his card?"

Sophy gave him the card, on which he read the pencilled address—

NO. 10 IVANOFF ROAD,
REGENT'S PARK.

"Well," said the policeman, "take my tip; don't you have any truck with him, see?"

But Sophy held out her hand for the card, and thrust it between the folds of her shawl.

CHAPTER II

HARVEY REDFORD

ONE morning, about a fortnight after his conversation with Sophy, Acton Marsh was standing before a canvas in his large, well-appointed studio, when he was interrupted by the entrance of a pleasant-looking, fair-haired young man of about twenty-six years of age, who greeted him with engaging cordiality.

Acton, who in a manner worshipped beauty, and could spend an hour over the arrangement of a piece of drapery, seemed to pay very little attention to his own adornment, but Mr. Harvey Redford certainly could not be accused of a similar neglect. To judge by appearances, you would not have suspected for a moment that he possessed nothing in the world besides his pay and a small allowance from his uncle, Lord Crawshull, whose heir-presumptive Harvey was. But the Marshes and the Redfords had been friends long before the present Earl of Crawshull was brought, by two or

three unexpected deaths, within view of the title.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Harvey, as he continued to stroll about the studio, and took up a canvas on which were one or two rough studies of a dark-haired girl, "that's a pretty face."

"Pretty!" said Acton, looking over his shoulder. "It's a face such as you won't see more than once in a lifetime."

"Where did you see her?" asked Harvey.

"Selling flowers at a street corner, though she isn't like the ordinary run of her tribe. There are 'aitches' in her vocabulary—a slight twang of the streets, too, perhaps. I wish to goodness I had been able to induce her to sit. Well, when are you off?" asked Acton, as Harvey laid aside the canvas.

A few months ago he had arrived in England on sick leave from his regiment in India, but at present he appeared to be in the enjoyment of the most perfect health, and, in fact, he was to sail from Southampton the following day. As he stood talking to Acton the door opened, and a middle-aged man announced that luncheon was ready.

"Mr. Redford will stay, Fripp," said Acton.

"I've laid for Mr. Redford, sir."

For several years now Acton's household

had been managed jointly by Mr. Fripp, who had been a butler, and by Mrs. Fripp, who had been a cook. As long as the rooms were kept in a habitable condition and his meals regularly served, he gave the pair a free hand, nor examined too closely their weekly accounts. The couple, however, on the whole deserved his confidence. Preferring to have the lower regions of the house to themselves, they dispensed with other servants, and of late years Acton had gone his way undisturbed by domestic anxieties.

"No, thanks, old man, I mustn't stay, upon my word," exclaimed Harvey. "I promised to lunch in Grosvenor Square. I hope to goodness," he continued, as Fripp closed the door, "that my precious old uncle won't go making a fool of himself before I come back."

"When will that be?"

"Three years—more or less."

"Have you said good-bye to Grace Berkeley yet?" asked Acton in a rather significant tone.

"I'm going this afternoon," said Harvey, and a few minutes later he wrung Acton's hand with his customary heartiness, and set forth to Grosvenor Square, where he knew

that his visit would not confer the slightest satisfaction either on his uncle or himself.

He had known Grace Berkeley since her childhood, and it seemed hard lines to be compelled to part from her without some kind of understanding. Harvey had, however, known Mrs. Berkeley as long, and it was quite impossible to imagine that she would consent to an engagement until some of his expectations were realised. For though Lord Crawshull's habits were of too settled (or unsettled) a description to make his marriage seem probable, the fact remained that he was only fifty-five, and nobody could pretend that such an undesirable consummation was impossible. And while Harvey's maternal grandfather might die at any moment, there were plenty of other grandchildren to share his fortune.

Having done his duty at Grosvenor Square, Harvey turned his steps towards Gloucester Crescent, wondering whether he should even be fortunate enough to see Grace alone on this last occasion. But hearing that Mrs. Berkeley had a severe headache, Harvey looked extremely gratified, and asked for her daughter.

Grace received him with a little embarrassment this afternoon, and for once in his life Harvey seemed to be equally at a loss for

words. She was tall and fair, with good features and a pretty figure. Having recently passed her twenty-first birthday, she had sufficient discretion to perceive that the present farewell interview would require considerable tact. Assuredly, Grace would not esteem Harvey less if his uncle were to marry to-morrow, nevertheless she sincerely trusted that Lord Crawshull would live and die a bachelor.

She would sooner be Lady Crawshull than Mrs. Redford, 'although it may be she would have chosen to be Mrs. Redford rather than Mrs. anybody else.

"I saw Acton Marsh this morning," said Harvey, as they both sat down.

"By-the-bye," asked Grace, "did you ever see his wife?"

"Why, yes, I was at the wedding, you know, though I was only a youngster of—I suppose I was about nineteen at the time."

"What was Mrs. Marsh like?"

"Not bad looking—in a way. Her father was a half-pay major."

"I have never understood why she separated from Mr. Marsh," said Grace, not sorry to postpone a reference to the actual purpose of Harvey's visit.

"She led the fellow an awful life. I believe she drank a bit," answered Harvey.

"But why did Mr. Marsh, of all men, marry such a woman?"

"Ah, well," cried Harvey sagely, "you don't always find 'em out till afterwards. Before they had been married a year she flew at him with a knife; he has a scar on his arm three inches long—couldn't use a brush for weeks. Marsh hasn't seen her since that morning."

"She went away, then?"

"It was Marsh who went. He lived in Holland Road in those days. You see he was willing to do anything as long as she kept out of his way—can't wonder, can you? He didn't mind what he paid—he always had a heap of money, lucky beggar! In the end her father found some one to take care of her—a sister of his wife's—Mrs. Marsh's aunt, you understand. She had married a country doctor, who hadn't any practice worth mentioning, and I suppose Major Ford thought his daughter needed some sort of looking after."

"But," said Grace, "how does Mr. Marsh know that she is looked after if he hasn't seen her for the last six or seven years?"

"Well, to begin with, Renshaw is her uncle,

and it was her father who managed the business. I imagine Ford was satisfied. Marsh only pays the bill . . . five hundred a year for clothes, pin-money and everything. Now and then Renshaw turns up at Ivanoff Road and Marsh thinks no end of him, because he has kept the woman out of the way."

"A wonder she never tried to see him—to persuade him to take her back!" cried Grace.

"She knows the chap too well," said Harvey. "Though she did try it on once—that was when Mrs. Renshaw brought her to London just before Major Ford's death—eight or nine months after the separation. She wrote to Marsh then, but he would only answer through the Renshaws. It takes a good deal to make the fellow change his mind."

"I have always thought he was rather easy-going."

"Ah, yes," answered Harvey, "people do make that mistake. The best chap I know," he added, "and not a bit of a prig all the same. I could tell you of heaps of things he's done, only you know I didn't come so much to talk about Marsh to-day—the last day, you see."

"That sounds rather as if you thought the world were coming to an end!"

"Well, I feel like that," he insisted. "I hope you'll write to a chap," he urged, leaning forward in his chair.

"I generally answer letters," she returned.

"A good many things may happen in three years," said Harvey. "You can't tell; you may be married before I see you again."

"Plenty of girls marry before they are twenty-four," she admitted. "And so, may you," she suggested.

"Oh, come, you understand me better than that!" cried Harvey; "you see, I've known you since you were five."

"I can recollect," she exclaimed, "bidding you good-bye the first time you went to boarding-school—you didn't seem half so nice when you came home for the holidays."

"Grace!" he muttered, rising and coming to her chair.

"Well?"

"I want a promise."

"Oh, I hate——"

"Anyhow, you may as well wait until you hear what it is. I want a promise that I shall find you here—just as you are now—when I come back from India in three years' time."

"Where else should I be—unless at Torrington?" she demanded, with a rosy face.

"But will you promise?"

"Why, of course not," she answered. "How absurd it would be. There might be a fire—the house might be burnt down, a dozen things may happen."

"There's only one thing I'm afraid of," he persisted. "I want you to tell me I shall find you just as you are at present——"

"I hope to grow a great deal wiser!"

"Look here, Grace, it's no use beating about the bush. Promise you won't marry until I see you again!"

"My dear Harvey——"

"Promise, Grace," he urged, with a hand on the back of her chair while he stooped eagerly over her.

"I wish you had asked something within the bounds of possibility," she answered.

"Well," said Harvey, standing suddenly erect, "then I suppose I must say good-bye."

"Good-bye," she faltered, and as she rose he captured both hands.

"Can't you give me your word?" he asked.

"You—you know I can't," she returned.

"Is it only because of Mrs. Berkeley?"

"Good-bye," she cried, and echoing her farewell words, he released her hands and turned towards the door. "As it's really your last

visit," she began, as he touched the handle, when suddenly he faced her again, "I think I will see you out," Grace added.

Harvey followed her closely downstairs, and on reaching the hall she stepped forward to open the street-door. He put on his hat as they stood, side by side, on the mat.

"Good-bye," he repeated for the third or fourth time, and with that he crossed the threshold.

"Harvey!" she cried, as he raised his hat, "you — you understand that — of course, I haven't said you won't find me here!"

The next instant Harvey stood staring at the closed door, and after hesitating whether to ring for re-admission, he turned away from the house, with a solemn dedication of the ensuing three years to Grace.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW MODEL

"A YOUNG woman wants to see you, sir," said Fripp at four o'clock the same afternoon, as he stood with a hand on the studio door.

"Who is she—a model?" asked Acton.

"She gives the name of Bunce, sir—Sophy Bunce."

"Never heard it in my life," muttered Acton, whereupon Fripp advanced farther into the room, holding out a bent and soiled visiting-card, which Acton recognised as that which he had given to the flower-seller in Oxford Street about a fortnight ago. "Bring her in," he added, and Fripp returned to the hall.

The past fortnight had been a distressful one for Sophy, although her sudden necessity to play something of a woman's part in the world had given rise to a sense of responsibility and importance not altogether devoid of satisfaction. Ten days ago she had sat holding Mrs. Bunce's hand while life ebbed slowly

away, but the morning after the old woman's death Mrs. Draper invited the girl to sleep upstairs in her own already overcrowded room until after the funeral.

Still advised by Mrs. Draper, Sophy called in a broker, who took away a portion of the furniture and left in exchange sufficient money to pay the undertaker. She will never forget the miserable drive one very rainy day in a cab with Mrs. Draper and the baby, which could not be left at home, behind the shabby hearse to the cemetery, where she stood on the soft damp earth at the grave-side, while the clergyman gabbled through the service and the rain beat down pitilessly on her hat. Nor the journey home again, with both windows of the cab drawn up, the baby screaming, Mrs. Draper singing a song from a popular comic opera to soothe the child, whilst Sophy sat with tearful eyes wondering what had really become of Granny! It had been bad enough when the old woman lay, yellow-faced and silent, on the bed, and afterwards when the coffin had been fastened down; but Sophy had never felt quite so lonely as now that nothing remained visible of Mrs. Bunce above the earth.

Having yet a few shillings left, as the result

of the sale of the bed and other articles of dilapidated furniture, Sophy recognised no immediate need to return to the corner of Tottenham Court Road—it required all the stimulus of Granny's necessity to impel her to such a course as that. She fancied she could do better for herself, and more than once already she had looked at Acton Marsh's card.

He had assured her of the possibility of earning a few shillings a day, and she liked the notion of having her portrait painted—just as she had seen the portrait of the Queen on the pavement, only better. Anticipating possible interference from Mrs. Draper, Sophy gave no inkling of her purpose; but, setting forth on the afternoon of Harvey Redford's farewell interview with Grace Berkeley, she walked to Leicester Square, and by dint of many inquiries at last found herself, somewhat tired, outside No. 10 Ivanoff Road.

For a few moments she stood on the kerb gazing up at the windows. Although the house was not very large, it stood in its own grounds, all the appurtenances suggesting strange and agreeable luxury. Already before she ventured to ring the bell Sophy's imagination began to work, and she wondered

whether her next step would be the first on the way to fortune. Extraordinary things sometimes occurred ; she had, indeed, read about such things, and in a manner she realised that she was no ordinary person. Mr. Marsh would certainly not have asked an average girl to sit for him ; while Granny's frequent warnings, better remembered during the last few days perhaps than ever before, had encouraged the idea that people were certain to admire her and to make much of her. Still no one had made much of her until the present moment, and nothing could be more unpleasant than living in that lonely room with little to eat.

Nobody knew the horror she endured night after night after the candle was put out, when she conjured back the coffin to the surface of the earth, and would rise in the small hours, stealing barefoot across the boards, to find out whether it was really in the room or not.

Sophy rang the bell, and a few moments later the door was opened by Fripp, who, receiving the card from her hand, left her on the mat while he carried it to the studio. After a short interval he returned and bade her follow him ; her footsteps resounded on the tessellated pavement of the hall, then

Fripp opened a door, and she felt almost as if some kind of wonderful transformation had already begun.

The studio was light and lofty; some of its walls were covered with delicate drapery, on others hung a number of small pictures. Acton Marsh took a pride in this portion of his house, which had been partly decorated with his own hand. To Sophy's mind the studio seemed palatial; she had never beheld anything in the least resembling it before. As Fripp closed the door, she stood just within the threshold, her blue eyes wide open, until the silence was broken by Acton, who came forth from behind the easel, with a palette on his left thumb and a brush in his right hand.

"Won't you come a little further in?" he suggested, but when she put her feet on one of the small rugs which lay about the parquet floor, it seemed to slip along as if it were, in fact, one of those enchanted carpets in which she perhaps half believed.

"Sit down," Acton said, pointing with his brush to a large and very comfortable-looking arm-chair. Sophy stared at it hesitatingly for a second, then, sitting down, she felt as if she were sinking she knew not whither. After her

long tramp over the pavements, however, it seemed so delightful that she could not repress a sigh of relief.

"Tired?" asked Acton, laying aside his palette.

"Only a little," was the answer.

"How far have you walked?"

"From Drury Lane," said Sophy, and having recovered herself to some extent, she began to gaze about the studio. "I've often read of places like this," she added.

"Where?" he inquired, with a smile.

"In the 'Arabian Nights,'" she answered, as her eyes still wandered.

She looked very childish in the capacious chair, but if she had been a less beautiful child Acton confessedly would have taken little or no interest in her. As he stood watching her wonderful face he suddenly seized somewhat of Sophy's point of view.

Accustomed to squalid surroundings, he perceived that she had entered a relatively enchanted place, and with a half whimsical impulse he determined to keep alive the illusion. Having pressed the electric bell he met Fripp outside the door, and the result of the short conference was that a few minutes later the man re-entered the studio with a tray con-

taining the best tea which could be provided on the spur of the moment—certainly such a meal as Sophy had never imagined.

Her eyes gleamed at the sight of a cup of smoking chocolate, with rolled bread and butter, sultana cake, stewed fruit and cream ; Fripp regarding Acton with scarcely dissembled astonishment as he left the room.

“Now,” said Acton, the tray having been placed on a low table in front of Sophy’s chair, “I shall go away while you have a good meal, and then we will discuss business.”

But when he opened the door a large, tawny Saint Bernard dog came in, shambling at once towards Sophy, and sniffing at her boots. Acton saw her expression of disappointment when he whistled Captain to his side.

“Should you like him to stay ?” he asked.

“Oh yes, please !”

“You’re not afraid ?”

“Not of dogs and that kind of thing,” she answered.

“What *are* you afraid of ?” he inquired.

“Only coffins,” she said, in little above a whisper ; and with an astonished glance Acton left her alone.

Sophy’s only difficulty was to know what to begin upon, and she became a friend of

Captain's in a few moments. While she ate her fruit, she kept one hand on the dog's head ; and when Acton returned nearly half-an-hour later, she lay back in the large arm-chair sound asleep.

After watching her for a few seconds, he walked to a corner of the studio, brought paper and chalk, and, standing two or three yards away, began rapidly to sketch. It was some time later, when, still absorbed by his work, Acton saw her eyes slowly open, and sitting suddenly upright she stared at her entertainer in complete bewilderment.

"Don't you know quite where you are ?" he suggested, with a laugh.

She began to shake her head in a dazed kind of way, while gradually her senses returned.

"Have I been asleep long?" she asked.

"Long enough to give me your first sitting. You must let me pay you for it."

With amusing promptitude she held out her small brown hand, into which Acton put a half-crown.

"I am giving you a little extra," he explained, "on the express understanding that you are to go home by omnibus. Now, why," he asked, "did you change your mind and come here after all?"

"Because Granny is dead," said Sophy.

"Did you live with your grandmother?"

"There wasn't any one else."

"No father or mother?"

Sophy gravely shook her head; and in answer to further questions, she gradually told him all there was to tell concerning herself.

"Do you mean," he demanded, "that you are living absolutely alone?"

"Oh yes, quite alone," she replied; and Acton passed his right hand slowly over his moustache and chin.

"Anyhow," he said, "you are going to give me some sittings?"

"I don't mind how often I come here," she answered.

"Then, suppose we make a beginning at half-past ten to-morrow morning," said Acton; "but, understand, you must always ride. If you're tired you won't suit me so well."

"I should like to suit you," she murmured, and very reluctantly Sophy rose from the comfortable chair, following Acton through the hall and across the garden to the gate, where he pointed out the best way to the omnibus.

Riding homewards on a garden seat, Sophy realised that she had passed through a wonderful experience. She had entered a beautiful

house, she had partaken of a meal fit for the gods, she was riding home on an omnibus, and she hoped to reach Drury Lane two shillings and twopence richer than she set forth.

But, although her mind teemed with such marvels, Sophy had sufficient discretion to keep her own counsel. Mrs. Draper had never had an opportunity of seeing Mr. Marsh ; and lest she should attempt to interfere, Sophy did not say where she had spent the afternoon, nor how she hoped to spend the next morning.

For several days she continued to repeat her visit to Ivanoff Road, and, although no other meal of any description was forthcoming, with this exception her satisfaction was complete. To begin with, she was introduced to Mrs. Fripp, who showed her where and how to put on the white robe in which Acton intended in the first place to paint her. Sophy scarcely recognised herself as she looked in a glass, but she felt extremely proud and pleased nevertheless.

But her chief source of satisfaction proved to be Mr. Marsh himself. She had never come into contact with any one like him before, the nearest approach being one of the curates who sometimes visited Mrs. Bunce. But the curate had not seemed to take any particular

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interest in Sophy, whereas she knew that Acton admired her or she would scarcely have liked him so well as she did. He possessed the somewhat rare capacity to talk to a child as a reasonable being, treating her neither as an idiot nor a woman.

With all her innocence went a certain calculating tendency, which perhaps could never be entirely eradicated from her character ; and she perceived that Acton sympathised with her condition, while he always looked peculiarly grave at any reference to her lonely manner of life. While all her designs were of the vaguest, she gave the rein to her imagination and assured herself that salvation from her squalid surroundings must surely come through him. Confident that a tremendous change impended, she was enabled to make the best of many unpleasantnesses. As if to hasten her millennium, she would thrust her sorry presence more conspicuously before him, exercising unashamed ingenuity in aggravating his wrath at her lot.

And when Acton realised that this beautiful child was living unprotected in a London slum, he could not put aside the dread of what might easily betide ; he became more and more appalled at her danger, and about three weeks after Sophy's first sitting he spoke to Fripp

who was in the act of removing the luncheon. The butler accordingly set down the tray and stood with his body held stiffly forward, his hands hanging empty at his sides.

"You have noticed my new model," Acton began.

"The young person who had tea in the studio, sir," said Fripp, with lurking resentment in his tone.

"Her circumstances are rather unfortunate, Fripp."

"I dessay, sir."

"She is a remarkably beautiful child," Acton continued, when Fripp raised his hand and coughed. "What did you say?" demanded Acton.

"Beg pardon, sir, I wasn't aware I spoke."

"Well, what did you mean?"

"I was thinking the young person wasn't so far off being a young woman, sir."

"Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof——"

"Certainly, sir."

"At present," said Acton, who experienced a little anxiety, not concerning the wisdom of his contemplated action, but rather as to the manner in which Mr. and Mrs. Fripp would look at it, for he had no wish to part with them. "At present," he said, "the child is in

an extremely dangerous position. She has no relatives, no friends worth speaking of; she lives in one room alone, and I need not point out her risk to a man of your experience."

"If I might be allowed to make a suggestion——"

"Well, what is it?"

"I should recommend an 'ome, sir."

"Exactly what I thought of providing——here," was the answer.

"Indeed, sir?" said Fripp.

"She might be useful to your wife——"

"Mrs. Fripp makes no complaint, sir," was the answer. "We're both very comfortable, and we should be sorry for any alteration, sir."

"Of course," Acton explained, "Sophy would sit for me now and then"—he felt that his hearer was not sympathetic—"but my chief object is to remove her from her present undesirable surroundings."

"Beg pardon, sir, but do I understand," asked Fripp, "that the young woman would take her meals with me and Mrs. Fripp?"

"You didn't imagine she would take them with me?" cried Acton.

"I didn't know what your wishes might be, sir."

"In fact," suggested Acton, "you don't appear to take kindly to the idea!"

"You see, sir," said Fripp, "me and Mrs. Fripp don't feel any longing for what you might call society."

"Anyhow, that is a detail," answered Acton ;
"I dare say there's an empty room somewhere, and she can have her meals in that."

"A little lonely, I should have thought, sir," remarked the butler, but seeing the colour mount to Acton's temples Fripp began to realise that, whatever Mrs. Fripp might have to say about it, he had ventured as far as safety permitted.

"Well, that is my intention," said Acton.
"Mrs. Fripp will prepare the smaller of the spare bedrooms and do whatever is necessary."

"When is Miss Sophy expected, sir?" asked Fripp, as he took the tray from the table.

"Try not to be a fool, Fripp," was the answer. "I shall speak to her to-morrow, and she may as well come at once."

With a stolid expression, Fripp left the room, and going downstairs to the kitchen broke the astounding news to his wife, who expressed her opinion with considerable force and fluency.

"Say what you like," answered Fripp, "it

ain't my fault. I said all I durst, till the Governor put his foot down and told me not to be a fool. A man at my time of life!"

Mr. and Mrs. Fripp were as usual entirely in agreement, and whilst resenting Sophy's advent, they determined to make the best of things, since the time was not quite ripe as yet for their removal to that rural public-house, which had long been the object of their ambition.

CHAPTER IV

TAKING POSSESSION

It was almost enough to make Sophy superstitious for the rest of her life, for as she rode towards Regent's Park on an omnibus, the morning after Acton Marsh's conversation with Fripp, entirely unsuspecting that the grandest day of her life had dawned, she happened to see a cart drawn by a piebald horse. Cautiously shutting her eyes, and taking the greatest pains not to think of its tail, she formulated her wish.

Not a moment's reflection was necessary concerning its nature! Sophy wished that she might be so favoured of fortune as to be asked to live at No. 10 Ivanoff Road. She did not trouble herself as to the means by which such a desirable revolution was to be brought to pass. She did not encumber her mind with any trivial details; but that was her wish, and she looked very solemn and intent when, after a safe interval, she reopened her eyes.

Having walked the short distance between the omnibus and the house, and been admitted by Fripp, she observed that he did not wish her the customary "Good-morning." Nevertheless, it *was* a very good morning, warm and bright and sunny, so that Acton was engaged in the act of drawing one of the blinds over the sloping glass roof of the studio when Sophy entered.

"Good-morning!" she cried, feeling by this time quite at home in Acton's presence.

"Good-morning," he answered cheerfully, as she took her model's robe from a peg and retired to the small room where she always put it on.

An admirable sitter, she never required to be told the same thing twice. With all Acton's experience her postures were almost a revelation, and he told himself there was poetry in her every attitude—marvelling whence she derived the peculiar grace, which was even more remarkable than her beauty of form and colouring. She seemed to endow her draperies with the power of emotion; and looking at his canvas at odd moments during her absence, he flattered himself that he had captured at least a suggestion of her charm.

When this morning's sitting ended, she rose and, with an air of relief, threw her arms languorously above her head ; then, walking to the easel, she stood gazing for a few moments at her own counterfeit presentment. Presently, she retired to change her clothes, and came forth in readiness to depart, wearing a loose black dress, which in truth had been bought second-hand near Drury Lane.

"Oh, Sophy!" cried Acton, as she reached the door, "don't go for a moment. I want to talk to you."

"I hope I haven't been doing anything!" she answered, with an alarmed expression.

"Listen, while I tell you what I am going to do," he said, with the slight embarrassment which sometimes accompanies the conferring of a favour. "How do you think you would like to live here?"

Her eyes opened to their fullest extent, as she stood with her bare brown hands tightly clenched.

"You're not—not joking?" she murmured.

"No, I'm not joking."

"Oh, how splendid it would be?" exclaimed Sophy.

"Then you really think you would like to come?"

"Why, of course," she returned; "it's just what I've always wanted."

"Oh," said Acton, not without a sense of astonishment, for he would certainly have considered it too far-fetched an idea for Sophy's conception. "I should like you to understand what you will have to do," he added.

"I don't care what I do," she answered; "I'll do anything if only I may come."

"Sometimes you will have to sit for me," he explained. "And you will help Mrs. Fripp about the house, and do exactly what she tells you. She intends to give you a sitting-room to yourself, and a bedroom, and you must try to please her, you know."

"I *will* try," said Sophy, with a tremor in her voice. "May I come to-day?" she asked.

"Better say to-morrow," was the answer. "By-the-bye, you may want some money to square up with the landlord, and so forth; do you think that will be enough?" and he held out a half-sovereign.

"I shan't want all that," said Sophy, clenching it tightly in her fist—the first piece of gold that had ever come into her possession.

She had no thought of refusing it, although she had even already formed her plans for the

evacuation of her room. At this time she would not have been likely to refuse whatever he had offered, not because of any actual love for money in itself, but because such gifts seemed to be aids in that ascending programme which she had marked out for herself. Having no occupation at the moment, Acton lounged along the hall and crossed the garden to the gate, where he stood looking after her as she executed, in her glee, a kind of dance along the quiet road.

He had no doubts concerning the wisdom of his conduct. Indeed, Acton did not stay to consider whether he had acted wisely or unwisely. Obedient to a generous impulse, he had simply done what appeared to be the only thing he could do to save Sophy from a grave danger. He no more thought of the future than, plunging into a river to rescue a drowning man, he would have stayed to think where he could subsequently change his wet clothing. Acton recognised no absurdity, no incongruity, nothing fantastic or even exceptional in his own behaviour. He remained, for the present at least, entirely untroubled by Fripp's suggestion that the child would in a very short time develop into a woman, nor did he feel the least perplexity as regarded Sophy's future status

in his household. While she spoke correctly enough, it could scarcely be denied that her accent was sufficient to betray the manner of her upbringing, and without an instant's hesitation Acton relegated her to the realms which were presided over by Mr. and Mrs. Fripp; indeed, he perceived that Fripp was disposed to regard the child with absurd condescension.

Sophy, in the meantime, made her way towards home with the confident assurance that her career had begun at last. The first grand departure was on the point of being made. Henceforth she was destined to live in a beautiful house, to eat her meals in one room, to sleep in another, and to-day she felt bound to walk some distance, with an occasional run, to get rid of her excitement.

She laid her plans with characteristic calculation, and, in order to avoid the risk of vain opposition, she rigidly kept her own counsel. What remained of Granny's furniture would more than suffice to pay the landlord, and she could leave it without a tear.

It was late before she slept that night, and beside her bed lay Mrs. Bunce's red shawl spread on the boards, with Sophy's few possessions (not forgetting the dilapidated copy

of the "Arabian Nights") piled in the middle, in readiness to have the four corners tied together as soon as one or two additions had been made the next morning. She awoke at half-past five, although she did not know the hour until she had dressed and run into the street to look at a neighbouring clock.

Without bestowing a thought on breakfast, she tied up her bundle—it was not very large, and at six o'clock Sophy set forth for ever from the room which had been her lodging for as long as she could remember.

In spite of the half-sovereign, a cab was not for a moment to be thought of, and as at that early hour no omnibuses were to be seen, she set out valiantly to walk through the still half-deserted streets, and finally, at a little before seven, she stood, hot and weary, before Acton's gate. Sophy longed for a draught of milk from the can on the pavement, but resisting the temptation, she rang the bell, and a quarter of an hour later Mrs. Fripp, accompanied by Captain, and clad in an almost aggressively clean-looking cotton dress, opened the gate.

Mrs. Fripp stared in astonishment at Sophy and her bundle, but the essential fact of the girl's existence, that which governed all her

life, brought about the changes in her fortunes, and influenced her career for good or evil, was her almost irresistible attractiveness—for men and women, young and old, the best and the worst, after their kind.

It was not her beauty of form and face alone, for many might have resisted this; but in Sophy there lurked some subtle capacity of appeal, and Mrs. Fripp, even before breakfast and in spite of prejudice, could not resist it.

"Well," she began, only half grudgingly, "no one can say you haven't come early enough."

"Is it too early?" asked Sophy, not to be cast down this blissful day.

"Anyhow, don't stand staring there with those eyes of yours," answered Mrs. Fripp, who, notwithstanding her matronly appearance, had never had a child of her own. "Come in, do!" she added, and picking up the milk-can, she led Sophy where she had never been before, downstairs and along a narrow passage to the kitchen. "What's in that bundle?" she demanded as they entered.

"My clothes," was the answer, and Mrs. Fripp sniffed contemptuously as she turned to light the fire.

"You'd better sit down," she said. "I'm sure you look tired enough for anything."

Sophy put her bundle on the floor, and sat down on one of the wooden chairs, while Mrs. Fripp filled the kettle. In its way the kitchen proved of scarcely less interest than the studio; Sophy's eyes roamed from the bright, reflecting dish-covers to the dinner-service on the dresser, and when Fripp came downstairs he was astounded to see her with a slice of bread and butter in one hand and a cup of tea in the other.

Mrs. Fripp, indeed, had begun to relent, with the consequence that some time later, Sophy was seated at the kitchen-table, discussing a substantial meal of eggs and bacon. Accustomed to the most sparse and unappetising fare, the pleasure of eating was likely to play a large part for a while in Sophy's life, and so acute was her hunger this morning, so complete her lack of self-consciousness that she failed to observe certain disapproving glances which passed between Mr. and Mrs. Fripp.

When breakfast was ended, Mrs. Fripp took Sophy to the small but prettily-furnished bedroom upstairs, and seeing the narrow, high bed, she ran impulsively forward throwing herself at full length upon it, laughing gleefully as the spring-mattress yielded and expanded again. Rising a few moments later, she went

to the glass, and regardless of a spectator, re-arranged her hair with her fingers. She held the cake of pink, scented soap to her nose, laughing again in her satisfaction, though her face grew grave when she was told to untie her bundle and exhibit its contents; for Mrs. Fripp obviously regarded Sophy's possessions with unnecessary contempt.

It was when Fripp put the teapot on the dining-room table, that Acton heard with amused surprise of Sophy's early arrival—a fact which seemed also to possess a certain pathos. He felt somewhat alarmed, however, when he had lighted his pipe, and Fripp re-entered the room :

“Beg pardon, sir, but Mrs. Fripp would like a few words,” said the butler.

“Very well,” answered Acton, “she may as well have them now,” but he began to wonder whether a strike was toward, and he should find himself deprived of Mrs. Fripp's services. Before he had waited long in suspense, she came panting into the room :

“A fine morning, Mrs. Fripp,” said Acton. “So your young friend arrived rather early.”

“Whereby her manners at table is simply shocking, sir !”

“No doubt,” answered Acton, “with the

example of yourself and Fripp, she will soon improve."

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Fripp complacently, "I always hold that next to a gentleman, a gentleman's gentleman's not to be beat. As to her clothes, I wouldn't touch 'em with a pair of tongs, except what's on her back."

"Better burn the lot," suggested Acton.

"Just what I said, if so be you're willing she should have others"—a necessity which had certainly not occurred to Acton's mind until Mrs. Fripp made the suggestion.

"I want you to understand me perfectly," he exclaimed.

"Whereby, I think I do, sir, though there's them as won't."

"I have no wish to put absurd ideas into the child's head," he continued. "But at the same time she must have what is necessary. I will send you down some money and everything else must be left to your discretion. I can lunch at the club, so that you and Sophy may get through your shopping this morning."

The consequence was that at about a quarter to eleven Mrs. Fripp set forth with Sophy to a huge shop at Islington, where a very delightful hour was spent as well as a few pounds of Acton's money, then a four-wheeled cab was

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called, and several boxes and parcels were placed on one seat while Sophy and Mrs. Fripp occupied the other. On reaching Ivanoff Road, Sophy felt not a little disappointed when she was forbidden to change her old clothes for new until after luncheon, and even then Mrs. Fripp insisted on taking her first to the bathroom.

But she never forgot the luxury of that bath, and after a long interval Mrs. Fripp came to the door in some alarm to make certain that Sophy was still alive.

At the shop in Upper Street her eyes had not been idle, and when she at last succeeded in drying and disentangling her mass of hair after the bath, she did her utmost to copy the coiffure of the tall girl behind the counter. Mrs. Fripp astonished Sophy by the gravity of her expression when she declared she should never have recognised her, for Sophy entertained little doubt that the change was entirely an advantage. For her own part, if she had not felt anxious to show herself to Mr. Marsh, she could have stood before the looking-glass the whole day. Her frocks had never been quite so long hitherto, nor had they come near to fitting her slight figure, but now with her hair coiled closely about her head, her rather

long neck more exposed, her feet neatly encased, Sophy looked a vastly different person from the child who had sold narcissuses at a penny the bunch at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street only a few weeks ago.

On reaching the hall she met Acton, who had just returned from luncheon at his club, and coming to an abrupt standstill he laughed as he eyed her from top to toe.

"Come in," he said, opening the studio door, whereupon Sophy stood as if for inspection, her hands by her side, her neck slightly bent. For the first time Acton experienced a shadow of misgiving as he recognised her much more womanly appearance.

"Do you think I look different?" she cried gaily.

"Well, a little," he answered.

"Better?" she suggested, with a charming expression of anxiety.

"Fine feathers make fine birds, you know!"

"I don't know how to say what I want to say," murmured Sophy. "Because when I first came here and you gave me that splendid tea, I said 'thank you'——"

"Upon my word, I don't believe you troubled to say anything of the kind," he cried, with a laugh.

"Well, I thought it," she answered solemnly, "and when you let me sit for you and paid me, I thought it too. But now you have bought me all these lovely things I—I don't know what to say."

"You see," he suggested, "we all think a good many things it's just as well to keep to ourselves."

"Yes, I know," she returned.

"You seem to be thinking of something rather serious just now," said Acton.

"Yes—I am."

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"You've just been saying I oughtn't to tell."

"I hope you will always be equally obedient," he answered.

"Oh, of course," she cried, "it doesn't seem to matter what I tell you. I should like to learn things," she added, raising her eyes to his face.

"What sort of things, because there is Mrs. Fripp able and willing to teach you——"

"I don't know whether she can teach me what I want to know," said Sophy.

"What's that?"

"Suppose," said Sophy, "I had a magic horse and he rode away with me to a grand country, where I could have everything I liked,

it—it would be nice to know how—how to behave when I got there.”

For a moment she regarded him anxiously, wondering whether he would laugh at her, but Acton was not in the least likely to make such a fatal mistake. He seized her point of view with quick sympathy and, in fact, he felt a little relieved by its childishness.

“Then you really expect this wonderful animal to stop outside your door some day?” he suggested.

“It needn’t be a horse, you know!”

“Anyway, you seem to count on seeing this glorious country,” he said.

She smiled bewitchingly into his face.

“Why, I feel I am on the way there already,” she answered.

CHAPTER V

TIME PASSES

SOPHY's transformation impressed Mr. Fripp so forcibly that he refrained from taking off his coat as usual at tea in the kitchen that afternoon. Declaring that Sophy would feel melancholy by herself in these early days, Mrs. Fripp good-naturedly suggested that she should sit at her own table, at all events for the present, and, after one or two objections, Fripp yielded.

In a motherly way his wife bestowed upon Sophy various valuable and necessary hints concerning her deportment at meal times, and, far from resenting such advice, Sophy actually appeared grateful. Indeed, when, a week later, Mrs. Fripp suggested that she should retire to the solitude of the breakfast-room, she begged for a reprieve.

"I want to see how you and Mr. Fripp do things," she said, and her words repeated that night caused Mr. Fripp to look to his manners

until the strain became too troublesome ; then he put his foot down, with the result that Sophy laid the cloth for herself in another room, and carried in her meals thrice a day.

To tell the truth, even if Sophy would not willingly have told it, her new grandeur began to seem a little dull, although she had, since Mrs. Bunce's death, grown accustomed to a great deal of her own company. It was disappointing to see so little of Acton, who, according to Mrs. Fripp, preferred to be left to his own devices and failed to appreciate any intrusions into his studio. Since her arrival at Ivanoff Road he had not hinted at further sittings, so that she frequently passed a whole day without seeing his face.

"Mr. Marsh don't care to be worried," said Mrs. Fripp ; but one afternoon Acton happened to reach the garden gate as Sophy was coming home from a walk on Primrose Hill.

"Do you usually go about alone ?" he asked, as they entered the house together.

"Always," she answered ; "there's no one else, you know."

"How about Captain ?"

"May I take him ?" she exclaimed.

"I think he may take you," said Acton, and

henceforth she never quitted the house without the Saint Bernard dog. It was one of her great delights to wear gloves, and her hands soon began to lose some of their brownness. More plentiful food caused the rapid development of her figure, which gradually tended to lose its boyish contours. Insisting that she was bursting out of her frocks, which must nevertheless last a long time yet, Mrs. Fripp showed her how to make the necessary alterations.

Though Sophy put her trust in Fortune with more than a tinge of superstition, she yet spared no pains to prepare herself for whatever might come to pass. At school she had been fairly well grounded; she could write an excellent hand, and read with perfect ease and enjoyment. There was no lack of books at the house in Ivanoff Road, and Sophy attacked them with an omnivorous zest. Moreover, it was not long before she grew discriminating enough to notice certain differences of voice and manner between the Fripps and Acton, who naturally became her model henceforth. Her power of imitation was remarkable, and it would have been amusing to hear how closely she copied his phrases, and even his intonation.

Left much to herself she brooded many

hours, and if, as the time passed, some of her childish faith in fairies showed a tendency to fade, perhaps her views of life became little more real. It is certain that she expected some special intervention for her own personal benefit.

In order to finish a picture which had been begun before he knew Sophy, Acton had postponed his holiday that year, but at the end of August she heard the Fripps speak of his impending departure.

"When are you going away?" she asked, meeting him in the hall one afternoon.

"The end of next week," was the answer.

"For—for long?" cried Sophy.

"Just for a month or five weeks to Switzerland," he explained. "I want to do a little climbing, you know."

"I've been reading about Switzerland," said Sophy.

"Ah, of course, I remember you're fond of reading," he returned. "Suppose I show you where to find some books."

He took her to a small room whose window overlooked the back garden, and where she knew that he passed the most of his evenings. It smelled strongly of tobacco smoke, and each of its walls was hidden by book-shelves.

"You can come here quietly by yourself and improve your mind," he suggested, "and when you think you have improved it enough for the time, you will find that side contains fiction; this shelf has nothing but poetry—but perhaps you don't care for poetry!"

"I do when it's about anything," said Sophy. "But sometimes it doesn't seem to be, and I can't understand it."

"Over there," he continued, nodding towards some shelves to the left of the window, "are my old school-books. Anyhow, you can come here as often as you like and help yourself."

He went away early in September, leaving especial instructions with Mrs. Fripp to look after Sophy. Until now her presence in the house had caused Acton no inconvenience and some pleasure, for his occasional talks with the girl seldom failed to amuse him. Nor, beyond the money he had expended on her preliminary clothing, had she proved a source of expense. Once during his absence Mrs. Fripp took Sophy to the theatre—two seats in the middle of the pit, but with this brilliant exception the weeks passed somewhat monotonously. She took, however, the fullest advantage of his permission to use the smoking-room, and many daily hours were spent there with the

window open and the door shut, while Sophy strove to increase in knowledge and wisdom.

She knew that he was shortly expected home, because Mrs. Fripp had received a letter from him, and complained that it was just like Mr. Marsh not to mention the actual date of his return, which took Sophy entirely by surprise one afternoon in October. As he opened the door of the smoking-room, his face bronzed and hardened by outdoor exercise, she closed her book and rose gleefully, holding out both hands.

Her gesture was so perfectly expressive of welcome, that in any one else Acton would have suspected affectation. She looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and certainly older, as she stood with shining eyes and outstretched arms, and, if the situation had its incongruous side, he felt that it would be boorish to repel her.

Instead of acting boorishly he took her hands within his own, and while he stood gazing into her marvellous eyes, for his life he did not know quite what to say. Although she was unaware of the actual date of her birth, it was assumed that she was about sixteen, but to-day the budding woman in her seemed to predominate, and, for the first time, Acton

found it difficult to regard her entirely as a child.

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" she asked, a moment after his arrival.

"I have had an immensely good time," he answered. Then, releasing her hands, not without observing their fresh whiteness, he took up the book which she had been reading on his arrival. "What is it?" he asked.

"Grammar," said Sophy; and he made a wry face.

"Fond of that sort of thing?" he inquired.

"I don't mind it," she answered; "and, you understand, I want to speak as you do."

"What an ambition!" cried Acton. "Besides," he added, "you speak uncommonly well—so you did the first time I heard you. Now tell me what you have been doing?" he suggested, leaning against the mantelpiece, and taking a pipe from his jacket pocket.

"Mrs. Fripp took me to the theatre," said Sophy. "She let me choose, though I think she felt rather disappointed."

"What did you choose?"

"'Much Ado About Nothing,'" she answered. "I found it in one of your books, and I grew so fond of Beatrice that I would have gone anywhere really to see her."

"Did you see Beatrice—really?"

"Oh, she was delightful," cried Sophy. "I have thought of her every day since."

"You must go to the theatre again," said Acton.

Her answer proved a little disconcerting.

"Will you take me?" she exclaimed. "I should love to go with you, because then we could talk about it afterwards. Mrs. Fripp doesn't care to talk about it."

"Some day we must see what happens," said Acton hastily, for she had a habit of persisting. "What else have you been up to?"

"Nothing," she returned.

"Anyhow, you must do something every day," he suggested.

"Oh, well," she explained, "of course I get up every morning and have breakfast alone in the room next to the kitchen, and then I make my bed and dust my room, and while you have been away Mrs. Fripp has let me dust the studio. Then I generally take Captain for a walk—we walked to Hampstead Heath, and it's lovely! When I come home there's dinner——"

"Alone?"

"With Captain," she answered. "And in

the afternoons I always bring him here and read till tea-time. I have read ever so many of your books. Do you think I am improving?" she asked, looking up gravely into his face.

"I have no doubt," said Acton; "you know as well as I do that improvement would be rather difficult in some ways."

"Oh yes," she answered, with startling candour. "Because I often look at your canvases, but I didn't mean that. I want to know whether I have improved in other things?"

"If you go along as you are going," he returned, "the world will scarcely hold you."

"But really?" she pleaded.

"What happens after tea?" he asked.

"Oh, now Mrs. Fripp says it's too dark to go out, I read again, and think of things——"

"Now what manner of things do you think about?"

"Of what is going to happen by-and-by."

"Well, what is going to happen?"

"Ah!" murmured Sophy, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"Anyhow," he suggested, "you speak as if you could forecast the years."

"Of course I can't," Sophy admitted; "but

still——” and she became expressively silent.

“Well?” he urged.

“I don’t know, and yet it seems that I do.”

“You mean,” he said, for Acton was certainly beginning to feel rather eager for information on the subject, “that without any very definite notion of the particulars you have a kind of general idea, is that it?”

“Yes; because I was living—living there, and I always longed to get away, and then I met you—— Oh!” she broke off suddenly, “do you remember the day you bought those three penny bunches of narcissuses from me, and threw them away after you crossed the road? What a long time ago it seems!”

“Well,” answered Acton, “you are happier than you were in those days, I hope, although you still perplex yourself about the future.”

“Ah, but I’m not anxious about it as I used to be,” she explained, “when Granny lay ill and I didn’t know how to pay the doctor and buy her food. Only,” she continued, with an obvious struggle to express herself clearly, “I got what I wished for then, and I—I dare say I shall get it again.”

“I wonder whether you really know what

you want," said Acton. "The fact is you still half believe in those old fairy stories, and expect some godmother or other wonderful person to turn up——"

"I think I do," she admitted; and Acton stood watching her bright face while he pessimistically assured himself that she was condemned to the common human disillusionment, that the elaborate banquet which she anticipated must, sooner or later, prove to be Dead Sea fruit. Remembering his own sorry experiences, the moment appeared fitting for a word in season—a sensible word to dispel these childish hallucinations, only that he had not the heart to disillusion her. Let the child dream on! Not for him to hasten the inevitable day when her eyes must open to the realities of things.

CHAPTER VI

DR. RENSHAW

ACTON MARSH'S own eyes, however, were beginning to open, and soon after he had settled down at home again for the winter he began seriously to consider Sophy's future.

On her instalment at Ivanoff Road he had assumed that in a general way she would fall into line with Mr. and Mrs. Fripp, but before Christmas he became convinced that Sophy would never be so easily contented. To refrain from encouraging her efforts at self-improvement seemed little less than a sin, and accordingly he did his utmost to impart some method to her studies. Christmas passed, the afternoons began to lengthen, the promise of spring again gladdened the earth, when one afternoon in April Acton received a visit from Dr. Renshaw.

Dr. Renshaw had entered well on the plains of middle age; a man of the medium height, who wore somewhat shabby, provincial-looking

but scrupulously neat, well-brushed clothes. A little unbending and precise in manner, his shaven upper lip and greyish side-whiskers gave him an old-fashioned appearance. He found no inconvenience in forsaking his patients at Blythewold-on-Sea for a day or two, for in fact Dr. Renshaw had been a failure from the outset.

Although he might occasionally pick up a fee from one of the few summer visitors, the residents of Blythewold invariably preferred the services of his rivals. Acton's quarterly payments (in advance) formed the great bulk of his income, and but for these Dr. Renshaw and his wife, for they had no children living, must have given up their house long ago. As a rule, Acton sent the cheque by post, but sometimes, as on the present occasion, Renshaw would come to London a few days before the amount was due.

Such visits were anything rather than a source of satisfaction, although Acton placed in the Renshaws the most implicit confidence—the more, no doubt, because they had been approved of by his wife's father. Moreover, Mrs. Marsh was not the woman to remain silent under oppression, and, if her treatment had been less than the best, surely she would

have complained before to-day. Thus reasoned Acton, with sincere gratitude for the tact and excellent management which had from first to last prevented his wife from troubling him.

The same form of words sufficed on every similar occasion. Having shaken hands and invited his visitor to sit down, Acton began at once to fill up a cheque. Dr. Renshaw had an unfortunate habit of casting down his eyes, while to make this the more noticeable he would now and then raise them almost unnecessarily to Acton's face, like a man who was striving to cure himself of some mannerism.

"A very fine morning, Mr. Marsh," he remarked, as Acton signed the draft.

"Yes, the weather seems more settled."

"Having been compelled to come to London on professional business," Dr. Renshaw continued, "I thought I might save you the trouble of writing."

"How is your patient?" asked Acton, who could seldom bring himself to allude to her as his wife.

"Fairly well, Mr. Marsh," was the answer. Dr. Renshaw sat more erect, and made an effort to meet Acton's eyes. Then he moistened his thin lips: "A few weeks ago Mrs. Marsh was not—not so well as we could wish, a slight

cold, which, however, speedily yielded to treatment. Now, I am thankful to say, she is in the enjoyment of perfect health."

Without answering Acton blotted the cheque and handed it to Dr. Renshaw, with the assurance that there was no necessity for a formal receipt. The visitor then rose, deliberately buttoned his thin overcoat, shook hands again, and left the house. After spending the evening at a classical concert (he was an amateur of music and had some skill on the violoncello) Dr. Renshaw returned to Blythewold the following morning, when Mrs. Renshaw, a tall, spare woman with a pinched, melancholy face, received him with an expression of painful concern.

"Did—did Mr. Marsh ask after his wife?" she inquired, as her husband took off his overcoat.

"Oh yes, he asked after his wife," was the answer.

"What did you say?"

"Do you imagine I told him we buried her more than five years ago at Torquay?" he demanded snappishly. For this was the cause of Mrs. Renshaw's anxiety. Confident that their patient was sinking, faced by the imminent loss of all but a very small portion of their

income, Dr. and Mrs. Renshaw had laid their heads together. They removed Mrs. Marsh to Torquay, where she died and was buried more than five years ago, after having received nothing but kindness at their hands. The deception seemed easy and absolutely safe. Acton Marsh was extremely unlikely to venture near his wife's supposed neighbourhood, or, beyond the payment of five hundred pounds a year, to take any trouble about her as long as he believed she remained in the safe custody of her uncle. That the woman had passed into a safer keeping yet, Acton little imagined. As usual Dr. Renshaw's visit left him taciturn and gloomy. During the evening he marvelled, by no means for the first time, how he could have married such a woman, until he contrasted for the hundredth time her conduct before the wedding and after.

By a curious transition his thoughts turned to Sophy, and, being in a melancholy humour, he reminded himself that the girl could scarcely remain a member of his household for ever. Still he allowed things to drift until one day she came home from a walk with Captain, carrying three small bunches of narcissus.

"Do you know what to-day is?" she asked, obviously expecting him to accept the flowers.

"Any important anniversary?" cried Acton.

"Why, yes," she answered half-reproachfully; "I have been here exactly twelve months."

The reminder seemed to pull him up suddenly, but a complete inability to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, and the tranquillity of the passing days induced further procrastination until he returned from his October holiday. Then, the sight of Sophy after a month's separation stirred him to necessary action. She must be at the least seventeen, and her development since she first came to his house appeared nothing less than remarkable. To all intents and purposes Sophy was a woman, and the few visitors who came to Ivanoff Road eyed her somewhat askant.

Perceiving the desirability of consulting some member of her own sex, Acton invited Grace and Mrs. Berkeley to his studio one afternoon, explaining that he had one or two things which they might be interested to see.

He was not the cleverest of diplomatists, whereas he felt oppressed by an idea that the situation required the most cautious treatment. While he could not quite see his way to ask the Berkeleys to meet Sophy as an equal, he had little doubt that she was infinitely their superior.

But then Acton Marsh had his own way of looking at things, and perhaps he considered that beauty in itself was a virtue. For the rest, he was not sufficiently blind to imagine that Sophy was absolutely faultless. Crushed to a certain degree by his own unfortunate circumstances, he felt scanty sympathy with her ambition. Sophy's aims seemed to be frankly, almost aggressively material; her inevitable rise in the world was to come to pass through no effort of her own. Yet she appeared to count upon it with something approaching certainty, while Acton hated the idea that her beauty might be brought to market.

Her foibles, however, were so ingenuously exposed, her charm was so consummate, that he seldom attempted even silent criticism, whereas each passing day found him the more eager to ensure her well-being.

Having skilfully led up to the topic by the exhibition of some early sketches of the girl, Acton told Mrs. Berkeley and Grace her story :

"Before you go away, I should like you to see her," he added, and then, having taken his visitors to the drawing-room and begged Grace to pour out the tea, he began to talk about Harvey Redford.

"Grace hears from him occasionally," said Mrs. Berkeley, a tall, fair-haired, languid woman of about forty-five, as she sat with one long hand hanging over the arm of her chair.

"Did you know that Harvey's grandfather was dead?" cried Grace rather excitedly.

"I read the newspaper quite regularly," answered Acton.

"Mr. Redford is to be congratulated," said Mrs. Berkeley; "he has come into eight hundred pounds a year."

"How long before you expect him home?" asked Acton.

"About eighteen months," murmured Grace, with a sigh.

"You must say something pleasant for me when you write," he suggested, and then Acton rang the bell. When Fripp entered the room, he added, "Ask Miss Bunce to bring the copy of Blake from the table in the smoking-room."

"Poor girl!" said Grace; "rather an ordeal for her!"

But when Sophy came a few moments later she betrayed neither embarrassment nor gaucherie. Although she was surprised at Fripp's message and had no expectation of finding visitors in the drawing-room, Mrs. Berkeley considered that she displayed far too much

self-possession as she advanced towards Acton with the book in her right hand.

"There are two volumes, you know," she said.

"It was the second I wanted."

"Yes, I thought so," cried Sophy, "because that was the one you were showing me last night."

"Thank you very much," answered Acton, and, eager that she should not feel humiliated, he stepped forward to open the door. With a half-curious glance at Grace, Sophy bowed slightly, and in her usual unhurried manner quitted the drawing-room.

"Now," exclaimed Acton, "I throw myself on your compassion. I want your advice. You have seen Sophy, you have heard her story, and you may be able to form some little notion of my difficulty."

"My advice can be comprised in a very few words," said Mrs. Berkeley.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Get rid of the girl at once!"

"But, mother!" cried Grace, "how can Mr. Marsh get rid of her? He has practically adopted her."

"Adopted her!" answered Mrs. Berkeley.
"As what, pray? Are you suggesting that the

relationship is paternal? That of Mr. Marsh and a young person of eighteen!"

"Seventeen," suggested Acton.

"The year can make no difference," said Mrs. Berkeley. "She is indisputably a marriageable young woman—that is the essential point. She obviously feels very much at home here. There cannot be the slightest doubt in the mind of any reasonable person that you ought to send her away at once."

"But where do you suggest I should send her?" demanded Acton.

"Mother!" exclaimed Grace suddenly, "there is Madame Seymour!"

Mrs. Berkeley looked a little doubtful.

"A dear old friend of mine," she exclaimed, turning to face Acton; "she is a French Protestant who married an Englishman. He died three years ago, leaving her with very little besides three girls; she took a house in Brussels, near the Avenue Louise, and there she receives boarders, acts as their chaperon, and teaches them when necessary—though they mostly attend classes at the Conservatoire. I am extremely anxious to recommend Madame Seymour, but still——"

"You don't think her house would be suitable in the present emergency?" suggested Acton.

"To begin with," Mrs. Berkeley continued, "it would be rather expensive. I know that money is no consideration with you, but I am thinking of the girl herself. At Madame Seymour's she would be brought into contact with—well, with people of our own station. You have not told me how you propose that she shall earn her living."

"Well, I must think about it," said Acton, as Mrs. Berkeley rose languidly from her chair. "Don't forget to congratulate Harvey Redford," he added, as he took Grace's hand; "he hasn't been depressed by the news of Lord Crawshull's marriage yet!"

"Let us hope he won't be," cried Mrs. Berkeley. "For the sake of the possible countess, of course I mean," she hastened to explain as she quitted the room.

CHAPTER VII

GOOD-BYE!

IF Grace Berkeley had ventured eighteen months ago to suggest that Acton Marsh could possibly contemplate sending Sophy to an expensive *pensionnat* in Brussels or elsewhere, he would have ridiculed the idea. But on the evening after Mrs. Berkeley's visit it did not appear in the least ridiculous. On the contrary, the proposal seemed to provide, for the present at least, a simple means of escape from an anomalous situation.

Having picked up a pebble, he had come by degrees to realise that he was responsible for the safe custody of a rare jewel, while he had too complete a sense of the fitness of things to leave it unpolished or unset.

Moreover, Acton perceived that he was running the risk of spoiling Sophy for one kind of life without fitting her for another. Thanks in part to her excellent grounding at school, she had been able to make a rapid improve-

ment under Acton's guidance, with the consequence that in many essentials he considered that she was at least as well educated as the average girl of his own class—as, for instance, Miss Grace Berkeley.

Yet he had sufficient discrimination to observe one or two trivial differences. "Manners maketh man," runs the adage, but Acton Marsh was inclined to think that, on the other hand, man maketh manners. At least he recognised the necessity for a foundation of unselfishness and considerateness, and in this regard Sophy appeared entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, there were a score of little tricks in which she must be confessed deficient, and while she spoke correctly and her voice in itself was a delight, even Acton at rarer and rarer intervals could still detect a faint twang of the London streets.

He did not attempt to investigate the reason which had prevented him from mentioning the school to the person most concerned, until one day in December he received a note from Grace to the effect that Madame Seymour would be spending Christmas week in England, and that she would be happy to come to Ivanoff Road, if an interview were considered desirable. And should Acton deter-

mine to send Sophy to Brussels, she might return with Madame Seymour early in January. "Please let me know at once if you wish to see her," Grace wrote, "because we are going to Torrington for Christmas."

At Torrington Mrs. Berkeley had a small country house, not many hundred yards from the gates of Lord Crawshull's park, and there she usually spent several months every year.

Being thus required to decide the question one way or the other, Acton realised the initial necessity of sounding Sophy.

"Come to the studio," he said during the morning, "I want to speak to you seriously."

"What about?" she asked.

"Well, about Madame Seymour, who keeps a—well, not precisely a school. She receives a dozen or so of older girls at her house in Brussels——"

"Not me," exclaimed Sophy, growing suddenly excited. "You don't mean that you want her to receive me."

"So you don't care about the idea," said Acton.

"Oh, I should hate and detest it," she cried with considerable vehemence.

"Now isn't it rather foolish to hate and detest a thing you know nothing about?"

"Ah! but I know about being here!"

"Well," he answered abruptly, "the discussion stands adjourned. We will talk about it at a more convenient season."

"Please," she entreated, "let us finish it at once. It's dreadful to be left in suspense."

"I fancied," said Acton, "that you were rather eager to complete your education."

"You can learn a lot of things without going to school," cried Sophy sententiously. "Besides, I was at school for more than eight years," she added.

"At Madame Seymour's," Acton urged, "you would mix with girls of your own age; you would learn French. In fact," he said significantly, "you would learn many things which are out of the question here."

"But," said Sophy, "I should have to be away for ever so long?"

"I suppose that's inevitable."

"How—how long, do you think?"

"Not much use unless you went for a year," answered Acton.

"A year!" she murmured; and then after a brief silence she raised her eyes a little disconcertingly to his face, "You wouldn't mind my going?" she suggested.

"The very best thing in the world for you," he exclaimed.

"But—but—for you?" she asked.

"Shall I miss you—is that what you mean?"

"Yes," said Sophy, "I should miss *you*—I can't tell you how much."

"Well," he suggested, "think it over, and we will talk about it again this evening."

"May I come to the smoking-room?" she cried.

"If you really prefer that atmosphere."

"While you smoke you never seem to be in a hurry," she answered. "We can talk more comfortably," Sophy added, and she thought of little else during the rest of that day.

At first she dreaded to lose the grip of her present surroundings, fearing that if once she left Ivanoff Road she might never be permitted to return. But presently she began to recognise the manifest advantages to be gained; she would meet other girls—the kind of girls with whom it was natural for Acton to associate. If only she had an opportunity for observation, Sophy felt confident in her ability to go and do likewise. Every day made her more conscious of shortcomings in a variety of little ways; every day made her more impatient to remedy these defects.

Perhaps when she returned after that long absence Acton would not avoid her as he

certainly seemed to do at present. If she qualified herself as a better companion he might talk to her more frequently. Her brain teemed with ideas ripe for discussion, and Acton had a quick understanding. Even when she used to talk nonsense, albeit with extreme seriousness, he always seized her point of view, and so when (only half-believing) she sometimes talked nonsense now.

Having waited with some impatience until Fripp brought Acton's dinner things downstairs, Sophy knew that at last he must have gone to the smoking-room, and determined to waste no more time.

"Now, sit down," said Acton, leaning forward with a pipe between his teeth, "and try to be sensible."

"I have been trying all day," answered Sophy, with a sigh.

"Find it difficult?"

"It's not half so nice as being foolish."

"Define your terms," said Acton, with a smile. "What do you mean by foolish?"

"Oh, well," she murmured, "I suppose it's foolish to imagine you can have everything you want."

"What do you want?" he inquired.

"All manner of things!" said Sophy.

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"Tell me some of them——"

"I—I don't think I will," she returned, shaking her head.

"Anyhow," he suggested, "it appears that you are learning wisdom. That usually signifies a knowledge that some of the sweetest fruit is forbidden."

"Yes," she said, "because you can't do two things at once, and I should like to go to Brussels and learn things, and yet I—I hate the idea of going away and leaving you."

"Afraid you'll have to, Sophy. Now, what amuses you?" he demanded, as she broke into a quiet, gleeful laugh.

"I like to hear you call me by my name," she answered. "You don't very often, you know."

For some moments he leaned back in his chair silently smoking.

"Sophy, my child," he said presently, "you'll certainly have to go away."

"Must I?" she faltered; and he nodded his head once or twice.

"H'm," he muttered.

"You will let me come back here again—afterwards?" she pleaded; but instead of returning a prompt affirmative, he rose, laying his pipe on the mantelshelf and shrugging his

shoulders a little dubiously. Rising, she threw out her arms with a hopeless gesture.

"Where else can I go?" she exclaimed. "What can I do?"

"You need never doubt one thing," said Acton. "Whatever happens, you shall always be well cared for——"

"By you," she cried, carried away by her emotion of the moment. "You will take care of me yourself?"

"Anyhow," he continued, "you shall certainly come back here when you leave Madame Seymour, if only for a few weeks."

She felt more satisfied again, knowing that he would keep his promise, and confident in her own ability to induce Acton to let her stay altogether if once she returned to his house.

"Well, then," she said, "I will go to Brussels." And the next morning he wrote to Grace Berkeley, who accordingly arranged that Madame Seymour should pay Acton a visit during Christmas week.

During the interval he spent more time than usual away from home, and generally did his utmost to keep Sophy at a distance; but as if she were intent on leaving the very strongest impression behind her, she seemed to

be endeavouring to oppose his self-denying ordinances. Sad days for Sophy, because of her imminent departure; trying days for Acton, because of her constant presence!

Concerning Madame Seymour he formed the most favourable opinion, introducing her to Sophy, whose circumstances Grace had already explained. There being no one else but Mrs. Fripp to superintend such matters, Madame Seymour even consented to attend to her pupil's wardrobe, and during the ensuing shopping expeditions Sophy lost much of her earlier awe.

"You understand," said Acton on the last morning, "that you are to let me know if you feel actually unhappy; but don't make mountains out of molehills. You are bound to feel rather dreary at first, you know."

"Shall you?" she asked.

"I hope to be far too busy," he answered. "Now," he continued, "as this will be your last night in London for a year, suppose we celebrate the occasion——"

"Take me to the theatre, then!" cried Sophy.

"Very well. We will go somewhere to dinner first, and to the theatre afterwards."

Amongst other things Madame Seymour

had provided Sophy with a simple evening-dress, arrayed in which she came to the hall where Acton was awaiting her at a quarter to seven. Her frock was black, her shoulders were conspicuously white, and she carried on her arm the golf-cloak which had been bought for the journey to Brussels.

Sophy was the only unembarrassed member of the trio in the hall, for Fripp seemed to be afflicted with a sudden cough, while Acton could not help marvelling what the butler's thoughts must be at the recent turn of events.

Often during the ensuing year Sophy looked back to that drive in the hansom on the cold, clear January evening and the subsequent dinner in the brilliantly-lighted restaurant. The meal was notable as being the first of which she had partaken in his company, but nevertheless it proved a somewhat trying ordeal. While many pairs of eyes were attracted to her table, Sophy felt terribly afraid lest some solecism should betray her. She always waited to see how Acton would act before committing herself, but when once she was seated in the fourth row of the stalls she was able to give herself up without reserve to the perfect enjoyment of the moment.

Three delightful hours passed, and then,

the curtain having fallen on the last act, Sophy made her way by Acton's side through the crowded vestibule, standing just within the doorway while he turned up her collar, and wrapped her cloak more closely about her. Outside she could see the long queue of carriages, and, as a few flakes of snow had begun to fall, Acton waited under cover for a cab.

Suddenly he felt Sophy's hand on his arm. "Have you got any money?" she whispered.

"How much?" he asked, feeling in his pocket.

"Oh, anything," said Sophy, and he gave her a half-crown. The next instant she was outside under the portico, pressing the coin into the hand of an astonished old woman whose stock-in-trade consisted of a few boxes of matches.

"Thank you, my lady, and God bless your ladyship," the old woman began, and Acton coming to Sophy's side took her arm, leading her along the street until he found a hansom.

"Poor old thing," she said, as they were driven away, "she put me in mind of Granny. She called me 'my lady,'" added Sophy, pressing her elbows against her waist.

"Did that gratify you?" asked Acton.

"Oh, well, I think I rather liked it."

"That seems to suggest an ambition to marry a lord," he cried.

Nestling down comfortably at his side, Sophy laughed as if with serene enjoyment.

"Do you think," she asked presently, "I shall ever be—be fit for anything of that kind?"

"Shouldn't wonder!"

"I intend to try ever so hard," she said.

"To marry a lord?"

"So that nobody need feel ashamed to—to marry me," she answered, and he felt her warmth against him, though he could not see whether she blushed or not.

"You mustn't forget," said Acton, "that all that sort of thing is only a kind of veneer."

"Oh," she cried, "but one may be sound underneath too, you know."

Trying as usual to bring himself into sympathy with her ultimate thought, Acton tried to convince himself that Sophy's was in reality a vague aspiration towards better things, which she knew not how otherwise to express. When the cab stopped in Ivanoff Road he took her to the drawing-room, where wine, soup and sandwiches awaited them. She threw off her cloak, and her hair had become slightly ruffled

by the shawl which she had worn over her head.

"Now," cried Acton, after a quarter of an hour spent in discussing the play, apparently in the highest spirits, "don't you think it's time you turned in?"

"You always smoke before you go to bed?"

"Very often—certainly."

"Mayn't I stay?" she pleaded; but he shook his head with an air of determination.

"You have to be up early to finish packing. You must leave the house at half-past nine."

"You are coming to the station?" she asked.

"Oh yes; I may as well see the last of you," he answered.

Sophy raised a pair of eloquent eyes.

"Not the last," she said. "Mayn't I stay while you smoke?" she added.

"Good-night, Sophy," he exclaimed; and then she went upstairs to her bedroom.

It had been a delightful evening—the most perfect evening of her life. Sophy could not refrain from comparing her comfortable drive in the hansom, the elaborate dinner and the champagne at the restaurant, the stall at the theatre, with the visit she had paid to see "Much Ado About Nothing" under the

auspices of Mrs. Fripp, and the difference appeared pleasantly significant.

Not that she had found the slightest fault with her first visit at the time—far from that. But now Sophy wished to see the drama of real life also from the best seats; to wear a proper frock every evening, to possess, indeed, everything of the best.

And it was the belief that her absence would facilitate such a future, which tended to lessen the pain of parting when the actual moment arrived. She said farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Fripp, indulged in a last glance around the hall, and finally left No. 10 Ivanoff Road with the conviction that she was a vastly different person from the ill-dressed girl who had brought Acton's crumpled card by way of introduction less than two years ago.

Little was said the next morning on the way to Victoria Station, where they found Madame Seymour accompanied by her three daughters, to whom Sophy was forthwith introduced. Then it was time to take her seat in the compartment.

"Good - bye," she faltered inadequately, giving Acton her hand.

"Good-bye, Sophy," he answered; and a few minutes later the train began to move.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO JOURNEYS

THE short railway journey to Dover, the Channel crossing (affording Sophy her first sight of the sea), the strangeness of the foreign language, all the experiences of that day were full of interest, the climax being the drive to the Avenue Louise, past the fountains with thick ice in their basins.

But at night, in a small room next to Madame Seymour's, Sophy's desolation was extreme, and she longed to get up, to dress again, and set forth at once to London. Acton, however, could scarcely have put her in better hands, and Sophy soon found that very few hours were left without occupation. She liked some of the girls, she did not care for others, and it was not until she had been in Brussels six months that she formed the great friendship of her life.

Winifred Chalmers was twenty years of age. She lived with her father and mother, her

brother and sister, at Torrington, close to Lord Crawshull and to Mrs. Berkeley, who had indeed been the cause of Winifred's coming to Madame Seymour. She was short and of insignificant appearance, with straw-coloured hair and a small, pale, plain face. The passion of her life was music, and she had come to take lessons from one of the professors at the Brussels Conservatoire. Winifred fell in love with Sophy at first sight; the two girls were as constantly together as Madame Seymour's plans permitted; and Sophy would sometimes seize the opportunity to steal up to Winifred's room while she practised—her habit for many hours every day. But whether Sophy's pleasure was due to the harmonious sounds or to the admirable occasion for thinking of other things must be left undetermined. The revelation of her lowly origin made no difference to Winifred, although her own father was what Mrs. Berkeley described as a self-made man.

For Acton, perhaps, those first six months passed rather more drearily. Before a year had elapsed, he received one of Dr. Renshaw's usual visits, when he was told that, although Mrs. Marsh had, a few weeks previously, not appeared to be in the best of health, Dr. Ren-

shaw was thankful to be able to say he had left her yesterday in the most excellent condition.

Entirely without a suspicion of the truth Acton signed the customary cheque, spent a melancholy evening, and during the following week stuck more closely than ever to his work in the studio. It was during November, one dismally foggy morning after breakfast, that with a preliminary cough Fripp asked permission to speak to him.

"The fact is, sir," the butler explained, "Mrs. Fripp and me has saved a bit o' money, and we've always had one ambition, as you might call it, sir."

"What is that?" asked Acton.

"A quiet pub in the country, sir."

"Then you are going to leave me?"

"I'm sure Mrs. Fripp and me's extremely sorry, sir," said Fripp. "We've both been remarkable comfortable here, and there's no particular hurry if you'd try to suit yourself."

This necessity to reconstitute his household compelled Acton to look forward to Sophy's return at Christmas. Unless he decided to allow her to remain at Ivanoff Road he did not see how to dispose of her, and to such a course he perceived the obvious objections. At last he hit upon the happy expedient

of lengthening her stay at Madame Seymour's in Brussels, and so the difficulty was shelved for another few months. To Sophy, however, the announcement of his decision in a short letter came as a severe disappointment, which was mitigated only by the fact that Winifred would not be returning to London until at least the spring.

The Fripps, it appeared, were willing "to oblige" Acton by remaining until the beginning of March, and by that time he had secured the services of Mrs. Wormauld, a solemn and formal but well-bred woman of sixty, who having lost her husband and fallen on evil days, showed the greatest eagerness to become what she described as Acton's "lady house-keeper." It was stipulated that she should intrude upon him no more than the Fripps had done, and that in due course she should act generally as chaperon to Sophy. Thus Acton devoutly hoped that he might at least succeed in silencing the voice of calumny.

So Mrs. Wormauld came to Ivanoff Road, and engaged two servants in the place of Mr. and Mrs. Fripp, Acton quickly becoming accustomed to his altered conditions. In the early days of May he received an urgent letter from Sophy beginning, "My dear

Mr. Marsh," and going on to explain that Winifred Chalmers would be travelling to Victoria Station *en route* for Torrington at the end of the month. Acton was implored to allow Sophy to accompany Winifred as far as London, and Mrs. Wormauld accordingly received notice of her expected arrival.

"I understand," she remarked, "that Miss Bunce is not related to you in any way?"

"No," was the somewhat blunt answer.

"There are the Leicestershire Bunces!" she suggested.

"She is not related to them either," said Acton. His tone did not encourage further inquiries, though Mrs. Wormauld's curiosity concerning his protégée was not by any means allayed. It certainly appeared strange, to say the least, that a man of Acton's age should stand in such a relationship to the beautiful girl of nineteen, whom he had described with perhaps unconscious enthusiasm.

"What time am I to expect Miss Bunce this evening?" she asked on the morning of Sophy's return.

"Dinner might be arranged for eight," he answered; "and as she may be feeling a little strange, perhaps you will invite me to share your meal."

As a rule he had his meals alone in the dining-room, the breakfast-room having been refurnished for Mrs. Wormauld's separate use. He set out in excellent time that evening, and reached the terminus while the train was still five or six miles from London.

In a first-class compartment with Winifred, Sophy was vainly striving after the calmness and self-control which Madame Seymour never failed to insist were amongst the chief signs of good breeding. But on this red-letter day the whole of Sophy's life seemed to pass in review before her during the journey from Dover : the old days with Granny in the slum near Drury Lane, the period of Mrs. Bunce's illness, the afternoon when Acton Marsh bought the three bunches of narcissus and afterwards flung them away. Sophy lived once more through that first visit to his studio, when she had fallen asleep by the side of Captain after the sumptuous tea, and she realised the gradual change which had taken place in her position ; so that whereas on her first day at Ivanoff Road she had joined Mr. and Mrs. Fripp in the kitchen, on her last night she had dined with Acton at a delightful restaurant, and afterwards sat by his side in the stalls of the theatre.

But that life seemed to end with her departure from London eighteen months ago, and whilst she counted on seeing Acton look precisely the same as when she had the last glimpse of his face after the train had begun to move, she could not avoid a slight sense of anxiety when she thought about the future.

Various conferences with Winifred and her other companions had tended somewhat to dispel a belief in her fortunate star, and Sophy perceived that a great deal must henceforth depend on herself. Would Mr. Marsh feel the same interest in the woman as he had taken in the child? for it was certain that childhood was left very far behind by this time. Her mind was troubled also by minor considerations which were yet by no means unimportant. Acton had not taken the trouble to explain the changes in his household, and now Sophy began to wonder concerning her future relations with Mr. and Mrs. Fripp, and whether she should still have her meals alone in the breakfast-room.

At last the train stopped on the bridge while tickets were collected, and a few minutes ought to bring Sophy face to face with Acton. But the engine advanced slowly, and presently came again to a tantalising standstill, so that it be-

came more difficult than ever to maintain that equable demeanour on which Madame Seymour had insisted. Then the train moved on again, Sophy's window passed the beginning of the long platform, and rising impulsively she stood on the watch for the first sight of Acton, never doubting that he would come to meet her.

"There he is!" she cried, half turning towards Winifred as he lifted his hat, and the next moment Acton was opening the door.

"Oh, how delightful to see you again!" she murmured, stepping on to the platform; and then she turned to her travelling companion: "Mr. Marsh—Miss Winifred Chalmers," she said.

"I have an idea that I have met Miss Chalmers before," answered Acton. "Have you any one to look after you?" he asked, but Winifred laughed at the suggestion.

"I assure you I am quite able to find my way to Torrington alone," she said.

"The Berkeleys will be going down the week after next," remarked Acton; and having refused his proffered help over her luggage, Winifred bade Sophy good-bye, promised to write the following day, and shortly afterwards left the station in a four-wheeled cab.

When Sophy's trunks had been placed on

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the top of the railway omnibus which Acton had engaged, and they had taken their seats inside, an unusual embarrassment seemed to prevent the exchange of more than a few casual words until they were well on their journey to Regent's Park.

Then it chanced that Acton met Sophy's eyes :

"I don't feel that I am quite accustomed to you again yet," he said, with a smile. "But the change in yourself is not the only one."

"You—you think I have altered?" she suggested.

"Of course, you have become a far more important person," he returned, and indeed she appeared to have gained exceedingly in dignity. Her voice also had a different inflection, the former twang of the London streets having given place to the slightest of French accents. "But," added Acton, "I haven't the remotest intention to spoil you by idle compliments."

"Not one?" she cried, with a delightful laugh.

"It's the first step that costs, you know," he continued ; "and there are my domestic vicissitudes to recount. I have lost the Fripps—they have retired to a public-house in Surrey. In their place is Mrs. Wormauld ; her husband

was a major in the army, as she will take an early opportunity of telling you; she condescends to manage my house, and she is consumed with curiosity to see you."

Sophy felt rather ungrateful when she rejoiced at the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Fripp; while, thanks to Madame Seymour and the girls at the Avenue Louise, she was able to form some idea of Acton's motive in securing Mrs. Wormauld in their stead.

"There's the house!" she exclaimed, when the omnibus presently turned the corner of Ivanoff Road. "Do you recollect," she continued, rather excitedly, "the morning I arrived with all my worldly goods tied up in dear old Granny's shawl?"

"And," said Acton, with a laugh, "this evening you require three enormous trunks"

CHAPTER IX

AT HOME AGAIN

THE door was opened by the new housemaid, followed by Captain, who sniffed Sophy's skirts with a dubious air, until going down on her knees in the hall she put her arms round the dog's neck and kissed his head.

When Acton inquired whether she would go to see Mrs. Wormauld at once, she elected first to remove the traces of her journey ; and when he promised to see after her trunks, Sophy ran upstairs to her former room.

But she rejoiced to see that it contained a new suite of white furniture, while she felt especially gratified by the sight of the roses on her dressing-table. She was still admiring the suite when Mary tapped at the door, showing the way to the men with the boxes.

"Dinner is at eight, miss," said Mary ; and, having little time to lose, Sophy began to turn over the contents of one of her trunks for her cardinal frock. In the hall, a little later, she

found Acton awaiting her, and felt pleased to see that he had put on his evening clothes.

"How nice of you to think of the roses!" she cried, and with an impulsive gesture she held forth both hands. She wore a dress of the darkest red, high to the throat, without a single article of jewellery, and fitting sufficiently well to enable Acton to observe the more womanly contour of her shape.

"I thought you might like me to support you in Mrs. Wormauld's presence," he suggested.

"Let me take your arm!" she answered, and the next moment he was leading her into the drawing-room. But while Mrs. Wormauld had been prepared to assume a critical attitude, her first impression could not be other than favourable. Before Sophy had assured her that she scarcely felt tired after her journey, the gong (a new institution) sounded, and the three went to dinner. During the meal Sophy chattered incessantly, telling Acton of the various friends she had left behind in Brussels, and especially of the one who had accompanied her to London.

"Are you going to the smoking-room?" she asked, when Mrs. Wormauld rose.

"Well, I had some such notion," was the answer.

"While you and I have coffee in the drawing-room," said Mrs. Wormauld rather significantly.

"Perhaps," cried Acton, noticing Sophy's expression of disappointment, "we might make an exception to-night."

"Yes, just the first evening," said Sophy, and leaving Mrs. Wormauld in the hall, she unceremoniously accompanied Acton to his den. "Now," she exclaimed, sinking into one of the comfortable chairs, "now we can really talk!"

"I fancied you had said a word or two at dinner," he suggested, as he also sat down and began to fill a pipe.

"Did I say too many?" she asked. "But you understand what I mean—you can't talk about things before a stranger, can you?"

"What things?"

"Oh, well," she answered, "it's almost enough to be back here again. How nice the smoke smells! Have you missed me?" she asked, with her eyes upon his face.

"Just occasionally—perhaps."

"But then of course you have been immensely busy," she said.

"Your portrait was by way of adding to my reputation," cried Acton.

Sophy looked obviously delighted.

"Then," she pleaded, "you will let me sit for you again?"

Taking his pipe from his lips, Acton stared reflectively into its bowl.

"We won't make any hasty arrangements," he said. "Wait until we have shaken down into our places."

"Of course," she murmured, "I haven't really any place here at all, have I? I blush—it is true, I feel my cheeks tingle when I think of all you have done for me."

"I am afraid we are neglecting Mrs. Wormauld," suggested Acton, making a feint of laying aside his pipe.

"I decline to move," said Sophy; "*J'y suis, j'y reste!* Yet," she continued, "I seem to accept everything as a matter of course, and I have never attempted even to thank you properly."

"Now be a good girl and don't," he answered.

"I can't. If I were to try I should only lose myself. And yet," she cried, "I wish there were something I could do for you."

"Well," he returned, "if I think of anything I will let you know."

She rose presently, bade Acton good-night, and returned to the drawing-room, where she

awoke Mrs. Wormauld. In her own room Sophy sat up for some time to unpack her clothes, and subsequently fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. The next morning, however, brought surprise and disappointment, inasmuch as she had expected that Acton would join her and Mrs. Wormauld at breakfast.

"Mr. Marsh keeps very much to himself," Mrs. Wormauld explained. "He prefers to have his meals alone. I cannot help saying he always strikes me as a man with something on his mind."

"He seemed perfectly cheerful last night!"

"Last night," said Mrs. Wormauld, "Mr. Marsh talked more than I have heard him all the time I have lived in his house."

"You think he has seemed dull?" suggested Sophy with the utmost cheerfulness.

"Extremely dull," was the answer. "I understand," Mrs. Wormauld added, "that you are not connected with the Leicestershire Bunces?"

"As I have never heard of them, I don't imagine I am," said Sophy.

She quickly fell into her former habits again, and during the morning she took Captain—who seemed by this time to have quite made

up his mind concerning her identity—for a walk in Regent's Park. After a rather wearisome dinner in the breakfast-room, with Mrs. Wormauld for sole companion, she mustered all her courage and made her way to Acton's smoking-room.

"Don't get up!" she exclaimed, "you look too delightfully comfortable to move. Besides I feel I can scold you far better lying down."

"Well—fire away!" said Acton.

"Mrs. Wormauld has been telling me how melancholy you have grown!"

"Calls me a dull dog, does she?"

"I am not going to permit it," cried Sophy, coming close to his chair.

"All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again!" he muttered.

"Oh, but you're not really melancholy," she persisted, "and you mustn't be allowed to create a false impression."

"I'm afraid you mustn't hold me responsible for other persons' impressions," he answered.

"But I intend to take the responsibility."

"Well, perhaps there's a kind of rough justice in that," he suggested. Seeing the deepening cloud on his face, Sophy leaned

towards him, resting a hand on the arm of his chair.

"Am I—am I——"

"Are you what?" he inquired, as she paused.

"I scarcely know how to say it, but do you think I am—I am going too far?" she asked.

"Too far?"

"You see," she exclaimed, withdrawing her hand, "I feel as if I quite belonged here, though of course I don't. I don't really belong anywhere, do I? But I talk as if I could say just what I like to you——"

"My dear child, so you can!"

"You know," she continued, "I was immensely happy in Brussels—as happy as I could have been anywhere else. And Madame Seymour was as nice and kind as she could be, but still she was always looking out for one's faults—to correct them."

"Did she see any faults in you?" asked Acton.

"Oh dear yes, ever so many. For the last eighteen months I have had it dinned into my ears in French and English that I ought to exercise much more self-control—and that kind of thing. But now I have come home again it all seems so good that I—well, I don't want to be too—too free, you understand."

"If only we were both in the same boat!" cried Acton in his unsuspecting ignorance.

"But you can do exactly what you please! You are a man; you can do anything."

"Everything but one thing."

"What is that?" she asked quickly.

"My secret," he answered.

"I shall make you tell me!" she exclaimed; but he shook his head with portentous gravity.

"I don't think you will," he said. "But for heaven's sake," Acton added, "don't bother your head about what you say and leave unsaid. Be yourself——"

"Very well," she cried, "then I certainly shall not let you be melancholy any more."

"What is your remedy?"

"As little as possible of your own company—especially at meal times. You gave me leave to take liberties, you know! I can be tyrannical when I please. Understand, that from this day forth we shall have breakfast together, we shall have luncheon together, and dinner together."

Acton persuaded himself that the real reason for his surrender was the fact that he could not put an indignity upon Sophy by allowing her to dine in the inferior room, but the consequence was related a week or two afterwards

in one of Mrs. Wormauld's letters to her sister. She expressed a fear lest she should shortly be compelled to look about for another home. She felt sincerely sorry, because she was very comfortable in Ivanoff Road, and it was impossible to know Sophy without loving her. The house had not seemed the same since her arrival, and in the natural course of events she must become its mistress before many months had passed. It was true that no definite engagement had been announced, nor did Sophy wear a ring, but then as she wore no jewellery of any kind, perhaps she entertained an objection to such things. But no one could live in the house without being forced to the conclusion that she was very much in love with its master, while for Acton Marsh's part, Mrs. Wormauld felt assured that he worshipped the ground the girl walked upon, and no wonder.

Less than a week after this letter was posted, Acton received one of his occasional visits from Dr. Renshaw, who assured him as usual that Mrs. Marsh continued to enjoy excellent health.

It happened that Sophy entered the house with Captain as Dr. Renshaw left it, and she could not help attributing Acton's extraor-

dinarily low spirits during the rest of the day to the presence of the visitor.

"I wish I could play to you," she said late that evening, when she had told Mrs. Wormald she wished to fetch a book from one of the smoking-room shelves. "Now, if Winifred Chalmers were here she would sit down at the piano and soothe you with low music."

"Well," answered Acton, "I can only be thankful she isn't here."

"Still," cried Sophy, "I am very fond of Winifred. She invited me to Torrington for three weeks."

"Why didn't you accept the invitation?"

"Of course I would far sooner be here," she returned, and the next instant she asked rather abruptly, "Who was your visitor this afternoon?"

"Dr. Renshaw," he answered, and Sophy noticed that his face had become white and haggard.

"I believe," she exclaimed, "that he has something to do with that tremendous secret you refused to tell me."

Acton rose from his chair, laid aside his pipe, and stood leaning against the mantelshelf.

"Sophy," he said, "I have changed my mind."

"You are really going to tell me!"

"H'm."

"You—you look," she suggested, beginning to feel rather alarmed, "as if it were something dreadful."

"Well, it is."

"You would sooner not tell me?"

"Infinitely——"

"Then don't," she cried.

"You mustn't try to shut me up," he said. "Dr. Renshaw has had the charge of—of some one closely connected with me for a good many years,"

"Of whom?" she demanded.

"My wife," he answered, and she stood a few feet away from him with her hands pressed against her forehead, as if for the instant she could not grasp the full purport of his words.

She wondered afterwards that her eyes kept dry, that she succeeded in putting a bridle on her tongue; for if she had uttered her thoughts she would almost have reproached him for the part he had played in her life. She would have demanded why he had been kind to be cruel now, and she almost wished she had never seen Acton rather than lose him at last. But when she saw him lying back in his chair,

his thin hands covering his face, and realised how it was with him also, Sophy fell on her knees by his side.

"You mustn't fret about it," she murmured, but he put her away with a roughness which she understood. So they remained for a while, scarcely daring to meet each other's eyes, both struggling to avoid the path along which nature would fain have led them. "Tell me about her," said Sophy, presently, and after a momentary hesitation Acton explained that he had been married more than eight years ago.

"We didn't hit it off together," he said, "and one day she flew at me with a knife."

Sophy drew a long breath.

"She—she hurt you?"

"I was laid up for a week or two, but still I was able to leave the house the same hour. Her father arranged for her to live with Dr. Renshaw—her uncle; and I haven't seen her since. Perhaps I ought to have told you the wretched story before," said Acton.

"It—it doesn't matter," murmured Sophy, rising from her knees, and without offering her hand or bidding him good-night, she left the room. Mrs. Wormauld, inquiring what had become of her a little later, was told that she had gone to bed.

Her dream had ended, and she felt that she was staring wide awake to face a new day. When she actually opened her eyes the following morning, Sophy told herself that she had become a different woman. Since the one object of her desire was forbidden, it seemed to matter very little what happened. The shock had left her reckless, while she had an underlying conviction that her position at Ivanoff Road would prove too painful to remain tenable. She even questioned whether Acton would wish her to stay, and she thought of tiding over the next few weeks by accepting Winifred Chalmers' invitation.

She was almost surprised on going downstairs that he met her as usual at breakfast, though he scarcely spoke during the meal, and his eyes looked as if they had not been closed the whole night. He lunched away from home, but when the gong sounded for dinner that evening he entered the drawing-room as if nothing epoch-making had occurred. His face, when he took his seat opposite to Sophy, nearly brought tears to her eyes, and to keep them back she began to laugh and talk without restraint.

In the smoking-room afterwards, Acton marvelled at the success with which she could

hide her deeper feelings, for that these must be of the most harrowing description he could not doubt for a moment. He was perplexing himself concerning the best means of providing for her future, when she opened the door in a tentative kind of way and came quietly to the side of his chair. It struck Acton that the expression of her face was almost maternal as she stood gazing down into his eyes.

"It's no use," she said, "I—I feel bound to say something."

"There doesn't seem very much to be said," he answered.

"But just a word makes a lot of difference sometimes," she persisted. "It's the same as when two persons quarrel, you know, and they can't go on exactly as usual without some kind of explanation."

"Still, you and I haven't quarrelled!"

"Ah no, but there's the same kind of chilly, uncomfortable feeling as if we had. Besides," she continued, with a little more excitement, "all the time I was talking at dinner—and I felt I must talk for my life although it would have been far easier to cry—you looked so miserable that I grew afraid you might think I was cruel. And I want you to understand!"

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"I think your mind may be tranquil on that score, Sophy."

"You have always seemed to understand, even when I used to talk nonsense; because you knew it wasn't quite all nonsense. I think," said Sophy, "that those fairies and genii were something like the 'x' in the algebra Madame Seymour used to try to teach me."

"You mean that they stood for the unknown quantity?"

"Yes," she answered, "only now I—I seem to know everything."

"Still," he suggested, "you don't wish you were ignorant again?"

"I wish I were dead!" she murmured.

"Sophy—Sophy!"

"But," she cried, "I am not going to die. Oh, I am going to live and do the most wonderful things! But there's one thing I shall never do again; I shall never speak to you about—about this any more. Only this once I felt bound to, so that whatever I may do, you would know."

Acton began to look a little alarmed.

"I hope you have no particular act of folly in your mind," he said.

"The only thing I should care for would be to go right away," she retorted.

"It might easily be managed. Mrs. Wormauld can take you—where should you like to go?"

"Anywhere—it doesn't matter where! Of course," she added the next moment, "I shall not go anywhere."

"Well," he said, forcing a smile, "you're nothing if you're not changeable."

"But, you see," she cried, "I can't do the only thing that would be of the slightest use. I can't get out of myself. I can't forget things. If I might only wake to-morrow morning and even find myself back again in that wretched room——"

"Ah," said Acton—

"'The moving Finger writes—and having writ
Moves on—nor all your piety, nor wit,
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears blot out one word of it.'"

"If they could," exclaimed Sophy, "oh! I would shed them night and day." But when he again spoke of her departure she refused to let Mrs. Wormauld take her away, and so she tried to settle down at Ivanoff Road, seldom meeting Acton alone, and even on such rare opportunities as offered, never venturing upon any dangerous reminiscences.

CHAPTER X

THE RETURN OF HARVEY REDFORD

ABOUT a month after Sophy's disillusionment a four-wheeled cab stopped at the door of No. 10 Ivanoff Road, laden with a large grey-painted chest. It happened that Acton had gone to Brighton for a few days, and that Mrs. Wormauld was out; indeed she had tried to persuade Sophy to accompany her on a visit to her sister, who had recently arrived in London for a few days.

"A gentleman to see Mr. Marsh, miss," said Mary, opening the drawing-room door.

"Did you say that Mr. Marsh was out of town?"

"Yes, miss, but he wanted to know when he would be back, and said something about leaving his box. I thought I had better speak to you."

"Well, I suppose I must see him," said Sophy, and, having left the room, Mary returned a minute later announcing:

"Captain Redford."

Harvey had returned to England with the profound conviction that he was a far more important person than when he sailed to India. During the interval he had inherited eight hundred pounds a year, while his promotion had been gazetted the week before he left Calcutta. Having reached London a few hours ago, having been to his tailor and made an appointment to try on some clothes the following morning, Harvey determined after that important task had been accomplished to lose no time in going to Torrington, where Grace's last letter had led him to expect she might be found. He had no longer the slightest fear concerning his reception even by Mrs. Berkeley. Without being precisely betrothed to Grace, his parting words seemed assuredly to give her the right to expect him at the earliest possible moment.

Not wishing to take the whole of his baggage to the country, he determined to convey his largest chest to Ivanoff Road, where he had no doubt Acton Marsh would allow him to deposit it for a few weeks. Hearing that Acton was absent from home, Harvey naturally inquired for Fripp, and learning from Mary that there was no such person in the house, he began to explain his wishes regarding the box. Mary, however, felt doubtful.

"I think I had better speak to Miss Bunce," she said, leaving Harvey with the impression that "Miss Bunce" was Acton's new housekeeper in the place of Mrs. Fripp. So that eventually he followed Mary with the expectation of being brought face to face with some uninteresting middle-aged woman, when he entered the room and found himself in the presence of a rather tall, dark-haired young lady who could scarcely have passed her twentieth year, and whose appearance was distinguished by the most remarkable gracefulness, while her face could not be compared for a moment with any other within his somewhat large experience. And yet, as he began to recover from the shock, Harvey could not help fancying that he had seen some one faintly resembling Sophy before. He was tormented by a sense of familiarity, although he failed to place her; and surely, he thought, he ought not to have forgotten.

"I am immensely sorry to disturb you," he began, wondering who she could be, and what she was doing in Acton's ménage.

"Mary said something about your wish to leave a box," answered Sophy as the housemaid retired.

"I—I haven't the least notion in the world

to whom I have the pleasure of speaking," cried Harvey. "I thought I knew most of Acton Marsh's friends——"

"Are you one of them?" asked Sophy, observing that he looked a few years younger than Acton, and that his pleasant, shaven face, was darkly browned.

"Why, rather—Harvey Redford, you know. Perhaps you have heard him speak of me."

Sophy thoughtfully shook her head.

"I don't recollect your name," she murmured.

"Do you know whether by any chance Marsh has gone to Torrington?" asked Harvey.

"Torrington," she exclaimed. "Then, do you know Winifred Chalmers?"

"Why, of course," he answered, happy to find some bond of sympathy; "everybody in Torrington knows the Chalmers. My uncle's place—Lord Crawshull's—is, you might say, next door," and Harvey still continued to rack his brains to establish Sophy's identity.

"Winifred is my greatest friend," she said, by no means unimpressed by the announcement of his relationship to a peer of the realm, although she had not heard Lord Crawshull's name until the present moment. "I am quite certain Mr. Marsh would like you to leave your trunk," she added.

But now Harvey began to look doubtful, and he had already asked himself which would be the most certain way of meeting this wonderful girl again.

For the moment, at least, Grace was entirely outside his calculations, and he no longer recognised the absolute necessity of journeying to Torrington to-morrow.

"Upon my word," he muttered, "I don't like the notion of blocking up the chap's house in his absence."

Sophy held her head slightly higher.

"But if I say you may!" she answered; "though, of course, it is just as you please."

Then a happy thought occurred to Harvey.

"You see," he explained, with every appearance of ingenuousness, "it's not only the question of leaving the thing, but I shall be wanting to get things out of it."

"Well, I suppose you possess a key," she suggested, with a smile which completely undid him.

A few minutes later he was instructing the cab-driver as to the bestowal of the box, which with the help of a loafer, who had been hanging about outside the gate, was carried downstairs to the breakfast-room. Sophy, glad of any distraction from her miserable reflections,

accompanied Harvey to the room, and when he had paid the men, she graciously held out her hand.

"I am most awfully obliged to you," he said, "and I shan't bother you very often. By-the-bye, do you know when Marsh is likely to return."

"Probably in a day or two," she answered ; and the next instant she asked whether Captain Redford was going to Torrington. "You might remember me to Winifred Chalmers," she added.

"Well," exclaimed Harvey, a little shame-facedly, "when a man has just come home after three years or so in India, there are ever so many things he has to do. I don't suppose I shall get to Torrington for a few days yet."

His cheeks tingled at the recollection of these parting words as he walked away from the house, and he upbraided himself with many opprobrious epithets. The fact, however, remained ; he was bound to see Sophy again, while she, beyond the usual consciousness (which it would have been affectation to ignore) that she had made a favourable impression, had no suspicion that she had been the cause of Captain Redford's backsliding.

Save Acton Marsh, whom she could never

have dreamed of comparing with any one else, who stood in a class apart, Harvey Redford was the only young man with whom she had, up to the present, come into intimate contact. She was too distraught to be capable of experiencing much of a pleasant order just now, but still, perhaps, the interview afforded Sophy a kind of gratification.

She had at least held her own—with the nephew of Lord Crawshull—and when on Mrs. Wormauld's return she related what had occurred, and learned that Captain Redford might perchance become Lord Crawshull himself one day, Sophy began to feel something like a pleasurable sense of excitement. Mrs. Wormauld had just been confiding to her sister at tea-time that there was something going on at Ivanoff Road which she could not understand. Mr. Marsh's taciturnity, combined with Sophy's obvious melancholy, seemed to tell its own tale, but if Mrs. Wormauld guessed there had been a disagreement, she remained entirely unable to divine its cause. But she knew, as she said, a great many facts about "the aristocracy," and while she did not think it suitable to tell a girl of Sophy's tender years all she had heard about Lord Crawshull, she explained that Harvey was his heir presumptive. "Un-

less Lord Crawshull should marry," she explained, "which I should say is extremely improbable, unless he should marry and have a son, Captain Redford will succeed to the title and estate. A very fine estate it is, too."

Sophy was faintly interested, but that was all. At least Harvey's visit had served to divert her thoughts for an hour, but at present that seemed to be his chief value. They soon began to revert to Acton, and after dinner that evening, making an excuse that she wished to find a book, she sought the smoking-room, switched on the electric light, and remained there until half-past ten. Standing where she had stood on that dreadful evening of her disillusionment, she gazed down at the chair which Acton had occupied, and lived through the interview again, and presently raising her hands with a frantic gesture, she pressed them against her forehead, trying to imagine how she should endure her life henceforth.

The following morning, which brought no word from Acton, was glorious summer, but the sunshine by no means served to dispel any of Sophy's misery. It seemed, however, to make it more difficult to submit with anything approaching patience. She was young and strong, and the blood ran healthily in her

veins, so that she could not sit down and hug her grief. She felt that she must be up and doing—she knew not what, though had she been a man, it is probable she would have gone forth to perpetrate some arrant foolishness. At three o'clock that afternoon, she took Captain and the dogwhip, which was useful only for the whistle at the end, and set forth in the direction of Regent's Park, but she had not gone many yards before, somewhat to her astonishment, she saw Captain Redford.

Lifting his hat, without asking permission he turned to walk by her side, although for a few moments he seemed to have nothing to say.

"Is that your usual companion?" he inquired. "Captain is an old friend of mine," Harvey added, as they crossed the canal bridge and entered North Gate, "though he only half recognises me. You know," he said, after a short pause, "I can swear I have seen your face before."

"Then," said Sophy, "it isn't very nice to have forgotten me."

"Oh! I haven't forgotten; only, the annoying thing is that I can't recollect the locality. I lay awake hours last night trying to recollect. I suppose you haven't been to India?"

"How long were you there?" she inquired.

"About three years this last turn——"

"Perhaps," she suggested, "you had seen my portrait in Mr. Marsh's studio before you left England."

"Has Marsh painted you——" Harvey broke off in ludicrous astonishment, and, stopping on the path, stared hard into Sophy's face. "By Jove!" he cried, with a sudden illumination, "you can't be——"

"Yes, I am," she answered, disposed to enjoy his difficulty. "Did Mr. Marsh tell you about me?" she demanded.

"The perplexity is to realise that it was about you he told me," said Harvey. "I recollect perfectly. I came to his studio one morning, and saw a wonderful, childish face he had painted from memory. He told me——"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," she cried; "he told you he had seen me selling flowers in the street."

"But though the face is the same," Harvey continued, "it doesn't seem possible——"

"That Mr. Marsh should have been so good to me!" she murmured. "But," she explained, anxious to do herself simple justice, "the flower selling was almost an accident. My poor old grandmother usually sold the

flowers, and I was at school—I was nearly sixteen, and I taught the tiny ones their A B C. But when Granny was ill,” Sophy continued, “and we had no money, there was nothing else to do, so I bought some flowers to sell.”

“If you hadn’t any money, how did you buy the flowers?” he asked.

Her half-defiant eyes were on his face.

“I pawned my jacket,” she answered.

She could easily have refrained from telling him all this, but to-day she seemed to glory in telling him. Last week she would never have dreamed of a reference to those days which appeared so far away, but she had a kind of longing to do something desperate—even mischievous, and now she watched his face for signs of disapproval and regret. But just as some persons decline to judge the morals of a genius by the standards of average men, so Harvey felt that Sophy’s loveliness placed her outside the category of ordinary women. Such a wonderful face seemed to necessitate a wonderful history, and whatever she had been, there could be no question as to what she was to-day.

They were drawing near the entrance to the Zoological Gardens, Captain walking sedately

between them, when Sophy turned to her companion.

"I suppose you live near here?" she suggested.

"At present," he returned, "I am putting up in Jermyn Street."

"Isn't that rather a long way?" she asked.
 "Then you are fond of this neighbourhood?"

"I am quite certain," he answered, "there is none to compare with it."

"That is what I used to think," she said.

"Have you changed your mind?"

The fervour of her answer astonished him.

"Oh, I would give anything to get away—anywhere—only to get away!"

"Well, let's," said Harvey lightly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Nothing very outrageous; the afternoon is still early, let me take you somewhere—into town. Hi! hansom!" he cried, raising his cane as a hansom approached after setting down a nursemaid and two children at the Zoological Gardens.

The abrupt suggestion suited Sophy's mood.

"Only there is Captain," she suggested, as the cab pulled up by the path.

"Plenty of room," said Harvey eagerly, and Captain appeared to have ridden in a hansom

before to-day. Harvey having said a few words to the cabman, took his seat by Sophy's side, the dog sitting on its haunches at her feet.

"I haven't the slightest idea where you are taking me," she exclaimed.

"You know you may trust yourself!"

"Oh dear, yes," she retorted; "I know I may trust myself——"

"With me?" he urged, bending towards her.

"With anybody—anywhere," said Sophy. He was simply the means of a little sorely-needed distraction, and the harmless drive ended at a fashionable tea-shop in Bond Street. Some demur was made as to the admission of Captain, but when once this had been arranged, Sophy really began (almost to her own surprise) to enjoy her surroundings. She remembered also that her companion was the future Lord Crawshull, and the revolution in her circumstances seemed to be accentuated. And Harvey certainly spared no efforts to please, while it did not take long to discover that the most certain way was to talk about Acton Marsh. He perplexed himself concerning her precise relationship to Acton, although to do him justice he did not for a moment cast a slur

upon either of those concerned. Of course the circumstances were peculiar. That could not be denied, but then Acton was an extraordinary man, while Sophy herself differed from all other women. Before he left that tea-shop in another hansom, he was in the mood to cast everything to the winds for the sake of a woman in whose company he had spent only three hours. Grace, honour, everything might go, if only Sophy would come to him. Thank Heaven, he was his own master. Only by himself taking a wife could Lord Crawshull cut Harvey off from his inheritance; whereas he was now in a position to marry whenever he chose. He would have chosen to marry next week—to-morrow, but yet he could not persuade himself that Sophy had given the least encouragement. True, it might be taken as encouraging that she had consented to accompany him this afternoon, but her complete coldness, the absence even of such blandishments as many of her sex would have permitted themselves, only egged him on, and he had sense enough amidst all his enthusiasm to realise that she must not be judged by ordinary standards.

On parting at Ivanoff Road she gave him her hand and thanked him; then, at a little before six o'clock, Harvey was driven away in

the hansom, already beginning to plan another meeting on the following day.

Sophy found Mrs. Wormauld mildly reproachful.

"I wondered what had become of you," she exclaimed, "and I waited for my tea until past five."

Sophy sat down on the chair nearest the door, and began to pull off her gloves.

"I happened to meet Captain Redford," she explained, "and he took me to Bond Street."

"A little unusual, Sophy."

With no apparently sufficient reason, for the remonstrance was quite kindly, Sophy rose from her chair and began to walk about the room in a more excited condition than Mrs. Wormauld had ever seen her—or perhaps anyone else. Sophy raised her arms above her head and let them drop despairingly to her sides again.

"Why shouldn't one do anything unusual," she cried. "Do most people behave so perfectly? It is maddening—maddening to go on day after day as if—as if——"

"Well, dear," said Mrs. Wormauld, with not a little curiosity, "as if——"

"If I don't do something I shall go out of my mind!" cried Sophy.

"Aren't you just a little hysterical?" suggested Mrs. Wormauld.

"I don't know what I am!" was the answer, while Sophy still threw her hands about and paced the room; "I feel as if I must be asleep and dreaming. Did you ever feel like that—as if things had become just too horrid to be true, and you told yourself you must soon wake to find them the same as they used to be?"

"If you will only tell me what is the matter," was the answer, "you know I will do my best to help you." But without replying Sophy walked to the door, ran up stairs to her own room and flung herself at full length on the bed. She changed her dress presently, however, and going downstairs earlier than usual, rejoiced to find Mrs. Wormauld already in the drawing-room. Gliding to her side, Sophy impulsively flung her arms about Mrs. Wormauld's neck.

"Please forgive me," she murmured. "I know I was hateful; you musn't ask questions, and I—I'll try not to be horrid to you again."

Mrs. Wormauld kissed her cheek, and then the gong sounding, the two went to the dining-room arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER XI

HARVEY'S PROGRESS

THAT uncontrollable outburst was perhaps the best thing that could have happened to Sophy, inasmuch as it compelled her to call herself to account with immense seriousness the same night. She remained as she had ever been, a curious compound of impulsiveness and calculation; and while she seldom failed to think over her conduct and to form her plans, often for her own advancement, yet when the time arrived for carrying these into effect, she would be transported instead by some momentary emotion and follow an entirely different course.

To-night she took herself to task. She knew that however long she might cumber this earth, she should never experience again the happiness of the past three years. Whatever might lie in store for her, she had lost what was by far the best gift life had to offer.

Nor did she think she possessed the strength

to bear the loss where she was. She must get away from these familiar scenes, where she was required to meet Acton morning, noon, and night ; whereas she could not endure the ordeal, nor, she felt certain, could he. For him and for herself she perceived the shadow of danger ; only the shadow, perhaps, or her regard would have been less. In that case he would have seemed to Sophy different in degree, perhaps, but the same in kind as other men ; but as it was he seemed not at all the same. It may have been — no doubt it was — extremely foolish of her, a relic of some of her early superstitions, of her tendency to believe in the marvellous, and Sophy did not for a moment attempt to analyse her emotions in this respect ; but the fact remained that she had stood Acton Marsh on a pinnacle apart, and one which he would have been the first to scoff at. And having set him there, it was scarcely too much, after all he had done, to say that she worshipped him ; there was indeed a romantic, poetical, idealistic quality in her love which might have set the mind even of Mrs. Bunce at ease.

Convinced, for the moment at least, that she could not for any long time stay where she was, Sophy was confronted by the important question : whither ! She might return to Brussels,

no doubt, but she could not live with Madame Seymour for ever ; she might go to Winifred Chalmers, but that could be only for a few weeks or months. When Sophy considered the question, she never dreamed of going backwards. She might have cried *Excelsior* with no more definite notion than the hero of the poem. But she had felt that she was destined for great things even before she met Acton Marsh, and though the greatest appeared to be forbidden, still she would have sounded her cry and have pushed on to her indefinite goal.

In any event there must be no more such absurdly hysterical outbursts. Never had it been more absolutely needful to remember Madame Seymour's maxims than to-night !

Sophy determined that she would never again expose herself to any human being, and so she came to breakfast the following morning with a gaiety that astonished Mrs. Wormauld ; and when Harvey Redford arrived at four o'clock the same afternoon, Sophy welcomed him with a cheerfulness which a man in the humour to clutch at straws might easily interpret as encouragement.

She presented him to Mrs. Wormauld, whose manner appeared a little too enthusiastic, and then Captain Redford explained that there was

something which he very particularly wished to take out of his trunk. Sophy accompanied him downstairs to the breakfast-room, and without troubling as yet to put the key in the lock, Harvey sat down on the lid, obviously intending to beguile the time with conversation. In the midst of things, Acton was driven to the gate; he entered the house hastily, shook hands with Mrs. Wormauld, and on inquiring after Sophy was told that she was at the present moment in the breakfast-room with Captain Redford.

"Why on earth are they downstairs?" demanded Acton; but before Mrs. Wormauld found time to reply, he was on his way to welcome Harvey back to England—glad, perhaps, to avoid the emotional strain of meeting Sophy alone.

"Hullo, Marsh!" cried Harvey, rising on Acton's entrance.

"Back again?" was the answer as the two men gripped hands. "I hope Mrs. Wormauld has been looking after you," Acton added; and Sophy, who found it difficult, in spite of last night's good resolutions, to keep a brave face, seized the opportunity to leave the room. In a few words, half apologetically, Harvey explained all about his chest, and then Acton

suggested an adjournment to the smoking-room.

"You look worlds better than when you went away," he said, offering a cigar-box.

"More than one can say for you, old man," answered Harvey, as he lighted a cigar and sat down.

"Oh well, I have been sticking pretty close to work—so you only arrived yesterday?"

"Three—no, four days ago," said Harvey.

"Yet you are not at Torrington!"

"That's rather obvious," was the embarrassed answer.

Acton regarded him with some curiosity.

"When are you going down?" he asked.

Harvey shrugged his shoulders.

"There are heaps of things to see to," he answered. "I only got my step just before I sailed——"

"Ah, I was glad to see your name in the *Gazette*," cried Acton.

"You understand, I have to get my uniform altered and—and all that sort of thing."

"Meantime, Miss Berkeley——"

"Of course, you have seen her while I have been away," Harvey suggested.

"Half-a-dozen times, perhaps."

"Did she——"

"Out with it!" cried Acton, with a laugh.

"She may have mentioned my name!"

"My dear fellow, I am not going to give the girl away. Of course, she told me that you had come into eight hundred a year; Mrs. Berkeley dwelt on the fact also. No doubt, you may count on a pretty cordial welcome all round. Don't let the grass grow under your feet."

Harvey knocked the ash off his cigar and continued to gaze abstractedly at its tip, then presently he looked up into Acton's face.

"I recognised Miss Bunce——"

"When you brought your chest this afternoon."

"It wasn't this afternoon."

"I understood Mrs. Wormauld——"

"The day before yesterday," said Harvey; "to-day I came to fetch something out of it."

"Found it?"

"Upon my word, I forgot," was the answer.

"Yes, I recognised Miss Bunce from that sketch you showed me—remember?"

Acton slowly nodded.

"By Jove, she has a wonderful face!" cried Harvey; and as Acton took no notice whatsoever he rose from his chair.

"I shall give you a look up before long," said Harvey.

"Mind you do," answered Acton. "By-the-bye, you're forgetting you want something out of your trunk," he added. Vague suspicions began to rise in his mind before he accompanied Harvey to the door; and when, a little later, Mrs. Wormauld considered it no less than her duty to enlighten him concerning Sophy's escapade of yesterday, Acton felt sorry for Grace Berkeley.

Two days later Harvey Redford came again, asking for Mrs. Wormauld, and Acton entered the drawing-room in time to hear that he had two stalls for the theatre on Saturday afternoon.

"I wondered whether you would care to let me take you," said Harvey, turning towards Sophy.

"I should like to go very much," Sophy began; when Mrs. Wormauld, thinking she ought to interfere, glanced half-inquiringly at Acton, who, however, at once looked another way; but, alone with Harvey in the studio, he hinted that the invitation seemed a little out of the ordinary course.

"It looks rather as if you were taking advantage of her situation, you know."

"Good heavens, Marsh——"

"My dear fellow," Acton continued, "if you hadn't known her history you wouldn't have

made the suggestion. Whom else could you have treated in the same way?"

"If another man had said it," cried Harvey, "I should have knocked him down."

Acton thrust his hands in his pockets as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "I'll return good for evil, and give you a word of advice. You have booked yourself in London till Saturday afternoon; the best thing you can do is to run down to Torrington the same evening. Think of Grace——"

"I—I am not committed to Grace," muttered Harvey.

"That depends how you define your terms. You can imagine she has been expecting you——"

"Anyhow, I—I can't go," was the dogged answer. "Look here, Marsh, I shouldn't have suggested the theatre if I had intended the matter to end on Saturday. I swear I can't live without Sophy. I mean to marry her——"

"And you have seen her four times!"

"To-day is the fifth."

"You haven't a shadow of a chance."

"How the devil do you know?" demanded Harvey. "I know you've been good to her and all that — uncommonly good, but that

doesn't give you a right to come between her and me. No man ever loved a woman as I love Sophy. She knows it—by Jove, she can't help knowing it, and she has promised to come with me on Saturday. For God's sake don't try to spoil me."

"As to that," said Acton, after a moment's consideration, "you must please yourself, though, as I tell you, I'm sorry for Grace Berkeley, and I'm hanged if you have treated her well. Anyhow," he added, "don't forget that I have warned you."

CHAPTER XII

A CONDITIONAL CONSENT

ACTON MARSH did not entertain the faintest doubt that his warning was justified, and nothing seemed less possible than that Sophy could, for a long time to come, dream of marriage with Harvey Redford or any other man.

Nevertheless, the announcement of Harvey's intention gave rise to the most distasteful forebodings, the more since Acton perceived that such a marriage would at least furnish a solution of her present difficulties.

Acton saw her set forth after an early luncheon on Saturday afternoon, but on her return he kept away from the drawing-room until Harvey had departed, although he felt somewhat inhospitable inasmuch as he had not suggested an invitation to dinner.

"Have you had a good time?" he asked, finding Sophy alone later on.

"Oh, I love the theatre," she answered.

“Mrs. Wormauld must take you often while I’m in Switzerland,” said Acton ; and in her longing to be rescued, even for a month, from her false position in his house, Sophy was beginning almost to look forward to his departure. Still she had not as yet formed any definite intention with regard to Harvey. It was scarcely possible to remain ignorant of his wishes, and she certainly regarded him as an agreeable companion ; he afforded a welcome means of distraction, but until the afternoon when he actually asked her to marry him she had by no means determined to accept salvation at his hands.

His ardour as he sat by her side declaring his unalterable devotion in the most glowing terms (Captain Redford, who might one day become Lord Crawshull), flattered her vanity. Even while he dilated on the unique quality of his affection, her thoughts flew back to the dingy room where she had lived with Mrs. Bunce only a little more than three years ago. It was a tempting prospect which he held out to her in some regards, and if it had not been Sophy would scarcely have permitted herself to hesitate. For she did hesitate when she heard him talk of the possible future, although it was not in her nature to be anything less

than candid. When he asked with exceeding humility whether she loved him in return, Harvey was not a little taken back by her unqualified negative.

"But I vow you shall learn to love me," he urged, as soon as he recovered from the shock, "if only you will let me teach you."

"Sometimes I am immensely stupid at learning things," said Sophy.

"For heaven's sake let me try," he persisted. "Promise to be my wife——"

Harvey grew dismally silent as he saw her shake her head.

"Anyhow," he cried the next moment, "don't say you won't. Let me come again to-morrow. I swear I will make you happy, and I, upon my soul! I worship the ground you walk upon." Even Harvey's genuine enthusiasm did not enable him to say anything fresh on the subject. "I shall come in the morning—at eleven," he continued; "for goodness' sake do your best to think kindly of me."

Promising that she would try, she sent him away, and during the remainder of that afternoon she went about the house with a thoughtful expression, convinced at least that she was called upon to decide a very momentous issue. If she declined his proposal she knew not

what was to become of her, whereas its acceptance would certainly facilitate her ascent. In her deliberations she thought of Harvey scarcely at all; it would have made little or no difference if he had been twenty years older, although it might have made a great deal if he had been already Lord Crawshull.

A conference with Acton appearing indispensable, she made up her mind to postpone it until the hour when he was to be found in his smoking-room, where she took him completely by surprise at half-past nine that evening.

"Captain Redford was here this afternoon," she began, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"He seems to come on most afternoons," was the answer.

"He asked me to marry him," she said.

"Well?" asked Acton, although her answer scarcely appeared doubtful.

"Captain Redford is coming again to-morrow morning at eleven."

"That doesn't tell me what fate lies in store for the fellow," suggested Acton.

"Oh," she exclaimed, throwing out her hands in a kind of desperation, "I suppose I shall have to marry him."

After all Acton was only human, in spite

of Sophy's opinion concerning his angelic nature, and while he struggled to master his demeanour he rebelled at the suggestion that Sophy could by any possibility give herself to another man.

"Although," he muttered, "you would sooner remain as you are?"

"I can't—that is just it—I can't remain as I am."

"In a few days I shall be out of your way," he said. "You will have the place to yourself—for a month at least."

"But you must come back again," she cried.

Rising from his chair Acton laid aside his pipe and stood leaning against the mantel-shelf.

"For goodness' sake don't make things worse," he exclaimed.

"Could they be—whatever I did?" she demanded.

"Very easily. Your conscience is clear; you bow to circumstances; you injure nobody. Perhaps you are thinking of injuring Redford."

"I told him—I was perfectly frank—I told him it was not a question of—of love," she faltered.

"Yet he still——"

"It seemed to make no difference," she

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explained. "He declared I should learn to like him." Sophy became silent as she saw Acton's irrepressible shudder.

"Think you would prove a very apt pupil?" he asked, struggling to adopt his ordinary casual tone.

"Oh, what does it matter?" she exclaimed; "I cannot live in this way. I am not made of stone. I suppose I ought to be able to control myself, as Madame Seymour used to tell me. But, somehow, I don't seem to know the way; perhaps one has to learn it younger than I began."

"So you think," he suggested, rather bitterly, "of marrying Redford merely to obtain food and shelter away from here?"

"Oh, there would be other things I should gain. Captain Redford is very nice——"

"And you are ambitious. You wish to be somebody in the world—is that it?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," she admitted, as if with considerable reluctance, but at the same moment she raised her eyes to Acton's face, speaking with quiet intensity; "but if—if things had been different," she continued, "I wouldn't have minded about that. I could have gone bare-foot; I could have sold flowers in the streets again—anything, if it had been necessary!"

"You don't feel you would sooner do even that kind of thing than marry a man you can't care for," Acton suggested.

"No," she retorted. "What does it matter?" she demanded, with a certain aggressiveness; "don't you understand that everything else is cast into the shade. I simply don't care."

"But," said Acton, "you must know at least that you will never be permitted to want for anything I can furnish."

"Ah yes, I know how good you are," she answered; "but I feel something like a man I once read about. Fate seemed to be against him, and he was prevented from getting an honest living, so he turned highwayman and took just what he could. I suppose I am greedy—avaricious. Why should I refuse to put out my hand and take what I can reach?"

"My dear child," he said, "there is always a price to be paid."

She shrugged her shoulders disdainfully: "You recollect," she cried, "that night you took me to the theatre, and I gave some money to a poor old woman who reminded me of Granny, and she called me, 'my lady!' Who would have imagined that one day I might become 'my lady' in reality."

"Even that isn't quite certain," urged Acton, who felt that he was degenerating into something like a Special Pleader. "It's at least possible that Crawshull may marry—he is only fifty-five. Besides, he is the kind of man to think a great deal about himself and his family."

"You mean," she asked, "that he might object to my marrying his nephew?"

"Well, yes, it seems more than likely."

"Still, he can't prevent Captain Redford from becoming Lord Crawshull some day!"

"Oh dear, yes," said Acton. "He might marry just to punish Harvey, or even if he stopped short of the extremity he could still make things a little uncomfortable. How should you like it if he refused to countenance you in any way?"

"Then," she cried, "you don't wish me to marry Captain Redford?"

"Sophy," he answered, "I am trying all I know to keep my own wishes entirely out of it."

"Because," she exclaimed, rising excitedly, "if you told me to throw myself into the canal I would do it! If you say, 'don't marry him,' I won't. Whatever you tell me to do I won't hesitate, because I am yours," she cried,

"I am all yours"; and she pressed her hands against her bosom, whilst Acton had never found it necessary to put such an immense restraint upon himself before.

"Well, then," he said, moistening his lips, and realising that he was treating her with less than the too complete candour which she had shown, "suppose we leave it this way. Before you meet Harvey again, I will claim authority as your guardian for the time being, and insist on an assurance that Lord Crawshull, as the head of his family, is prepared to welcome you as Redford's wife. Do you agree to that?"

"Oh yes," she cried; and when she came to think over the state of affairs the same night in her own room, the prospect seemed to have lost some of its allurements. What she longed for was a kind of intoxication, a plunge into the brilliant stream which yet should unite with the waters of Lethe. But if this were, as Acton suggested, to be regarded as a kind of preserve, and she were to be ignored by Harvey Redford's family, her demands would scarcely be satisfied. So, with sensations vastly different from his, Sophy waited for what the next few days might bring forth.

To Harvey it appeared a little ominous when, arriving at the house in Ivanoff Road

punctually at the appointed hour, hopeful because he could not bring himself to imagine the possibility of disappointment, on asking to see "Miss Bunce" he was taken forthwith to the studio. Mary's manner suggested that she had received definite instructions, whereas Acton's face did not afford the remotest encouragement.

"Is—is Miss Bunce all right this morning?" asked Harvey, offering his hand.

"Oh yes, thanks; she has been talking to me about you."

"Well?" said Harvey eagerly.

"Sit down," cried Acton, as he leaned against the easel. "No doubt," he added, "you have heard Sophy's story?"

"I have heard it, but," said Harvey, with considerable intensity, "it doesn't matter a hang."

"What about Lord Crawshull's opinion?"

"Simply, I don't care!"

"I confess that I do," answered Acton.

"My uncle, thank heaven, has no longer the slightest authority over me," said Harvey; "and if Sophy consents——"

"She won't, unless you can assure me that Crawshull is prepared to give you both his blessing."

Holding his cane between his knees, Harvey stared down at the Persian rug at his feet. If he could have gone his own way, he would have elected to marry Sophy quietly and at once, afterwards springing the announcement of the accomplished fact upon his uncle. He could form a fairly accurate notion of what Lord Crawshull would have to say on the subject, and for the moment Harvey wondered whether it could be possible that Marsh was deliberately raising a difficulty.

"I should like to speak to Sophy," he said presently.

"Not until you can give me the assurance I have asked for," answered Acton.

"You don't mean to suggest that you have a right——"

"Right be hanged!" cried Acton, with considerable heat. "Tell me that your uncle is prepared to receive her as your wife and everything shall rest with herself. You may see her again when you please, and hear your fate from her own lips; but until you have sounded Lord Crawshull, it's useless to waste time."

Although Harvey continued to protest, he was eventually compelled to leave the house unsatisfied; nor was his difficulty with Lord

Crawshull (and he knew there would be a difficulty, and that his uncle would make him writhe before he had done) the only one that lay ahead.

It seemed scarcely possible to visit Torrington without seeing Grace Berkeley, and assuredly he was treating her badly. It was true that he was on his way to take such steps as must entail Grace's final overthrow, and that he felt prepared to do anything in the world to make Sophy his wife; but at the same time memory began to play curious pranks, and especially during the short railway journey the following afternoon (his visit to Torrington Place having been heralded by a telegram) he could not keep his mind from dwelling upon various scenes, which had certainly been extremely pleasant at the time of their enactment.

Now, Harvey had to break the news to Lord Crawshull, being, as he foresaw, made to look and feel like a fool the while, and then it seemed inevitable to present himself to Grace, as he incongruously hoped, with the announcement of his imminent engagement to Sophy. On the whole, perhaps that two hours' journey embraced some of the worst hours which Harvey Redford had ever endured, although he might very reasonably look forward to their being soon surpassed.

CHAPTER XIII

LORD CRAWSHULL

GRACE BERKELEY had certainly expected that Harvey would hasten to Torrington as soon as he landed on these shores. After what had passed at the farewell interview a little more than three years ago, after all that had been since written in his numerous letters from India, it was natural that she should expect nothing less.

She knew that his vessel had arrived three weeks ago, however, and as yet he had not been near to her. She had received no formal notification of his return, and for all she could tell he might have remained behind his regiment, or have been drowned during the voyage, or suffered any other dire calamity. After all that had occurred, indeed, it seemed almost easier to believe that he had met with some disaster than that he had voluntarily stayed away from Torrington.

If she did not consider herself definitely

betroted to Harvey, she certainly regarded him as bound in honour to her. He had asked her to wait for him until his return, and his defection caused her annoyance as well as disappointment, although she realised that it was a little reckless and unlike herself to mention his name to Lord Crawshull. This was a week after she knew that the ship had arrived, when, meeting his uncle just outside the village, Lord Crawshull being on horseback and herself in her dog-cart, she assumed her most casual tone and inquired whether he had heard as yet from his nephew.

Lord Crawshull, since he unexpectedly succeeded to his title ten years ago, had earned respect in Torrington without popularity, whereas in different circles he was popular without being in the least respected. At the present time he was fifty-five years of age and one of the handsomest men of any age whom Grace had ever seen. He was as tall as Harvey and his figure was scarcely less youthful. His smooth, thick hair was almost white, while his somewhat heavy eyebrows were still entirely black. Some women thought his eyes objectionable, but at least they were extremely expressive, while his features were regular and well formed. It was a face which scarcely

varied. Lord Crawshull seldom displayed any kind of emotion, although he had a habit of slightly projecting his nether lip when he intended to be more than usually sarcastic.

His tenants were admirably treated, and Torrington under his sway had developed into a kind of model village; not that he had the remotest sympathy for his dependants, but he had his own standard of what was due to his position. He sought to live up, as it were, to a title which at one time he had little expected to inherit, and the most of his actions were histrionic.

"No," he answered, "Harvey hasn't troubled to write; but then he knows I am not exacting. A man in his circumstances is a kind of Jack ashore, you must understand. When he has had a surfeit of London, no doubt he will favour the country. We must try to have patience."

"I assure you I am not in the least impatient," she cried, with a becoming flush.

"It is certain he doesn't deserve that you should be," said Lord Crawshull.

"Only," she explained, "I naturally supposed Captain Redford would come to see you at once."

"To understand is to pardon," he said, with

a smile. "I have been a young man myself—a long time ago, you are thinking," he added, as Grace laid her whip on her pony's back and drove away.

Whatever Lord Crawshull may have been as a young man, she thought, he was very objectionable as an old one; although, in the ordinary unbiased course of things, and to judge by appearances, one could scarcely have described him as old. She bitterly regretted her indiscretion as the days went by, for she never met Lord Crawshull without some reference to his nephew's continued absence; and, while his words were casual enough, his manner showed that he enjoyed Grace's torment.

From Mrs. Berkeley, also, Grace had to endure a great deal. No doubt her mother meant excellently, but she was a woman who could take nothing for granted. Harvey's absence naturally surprised her, for he had been only too prone to haunt her daughter, in and out of season, when he was last in England, but Grace considered that Mrs. Berkeley need not have remarked upon it at every meal. Innumerable speculations were indulged in, until about a fortnight after Harvey's arrival in London, and his first visit to Ivanoff Road, Mrs. Berkeley asked Grace whether she sup-

posed that Captain Redford had gone to see Acton Marsh.

"How should I know where he has been?" demanded Grace, a little impatiently.

"That is the strange part of it," said her mother. "While he was in India he wrote to you constantly; yet, now he has returned, he suddenly drops you. If," she added, "he has gone to see Mr. Marsh, of course he must have been introduced to Miss Bunce."

"Why not?" cried Grace.

"Only that there are very few men who would not find her dangerously attractive," said Mrs. Berkeley; and the notion having once been put into Grace's head, could not be thrust aside. It happened that she met Lord Crawshull outside his own lodge-gate two mornings later. There were no visitors at Torrington at the time, Lord Crawshull being in the habit of making weekly journeys to London. His house was under repair, and great improvements, which he enjoyed superintending, were being made to the already extensive stables.

"Ah, Miss Berkeley!" he exclaimed, "I was thinking of you only an hour ago."

"Were you?" she asked, fearful of what was to come.

"I happened to be dining with the Chalmers's last night, and Winifred showed me a photograph of the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. She promised to bring her to Tarrington for exhibition. A protégée of Acton Marsh the artist, you know."

"I know Mr. Marsh very well," answered Grace, compelled to say something.

"Ah, yes, and my truant nephew has known him a good many years too. I fancy I can set your mind at rest about Harvey's absence."

"It—it has never been in the least disturbed!" said Grace, with an indignant flush.

"Well, as I ventured to hint to you before, he doesn't deserve that it should be. I can easily understand that Miss—I really forget the girl's name——"

"Sophy Bunce!" said Grace.

"Dreadful!" he exclaimed, "but then she will find little difficulty in changing it. I can understand that Miss Sophy Bunce might chain any man to her side. You appear to know her."

"I have seen her," Grace admitted.

"Ah, that signifies that you don't wish to see her again. Winifred Chalmers was wonderfully discreet for a woman and a friend, but one can read between the lines. So Miss—er—Bunce is not related to Marsh."

"I believe," cried Grace, in the bitterness of the moment, "that he picked her up in the street—she was a flower-seller."

"Lucky beggar!" said Lord Crawshull. "And so he took the trouble to educate her—anyhow he sent her to Brussels, where she met Winifred Chalmers."

"Good-morning, Lord Crawshull," answered Grace, holding forth her hand.

"And now, what is your unprejudiced opinion," he said, retaining it for a moment, "photographs are the most misleading things in the world. Is this Miss—er—Bunce as beautiful——"

"As she is good," retorted Grace, already sorry for her remark about the flowers.

"Then she is no exception to the rest of her sex," cried Lord Crawshull, as he lifted his hat, and he stood staring after Grace, stooping slightly, with his lower lip thrust forward, as she hastened homewards.

On the way Grace condemned herself for speaking as she had done about Sophy, the more severely since she was really beginning to blame the girl for Harvey's truancy. She tried to convince herself that his indifference was not of the slightest consequence, and at least she determined to make every

effort to convince him. So that his absence and the opinion of good-natured friends, prepared Grace's mind, and when Lord Crawshull paid a rare visit to Mrs. Berkeley, a few hours after the receipt of Harvey's telegram, and casually mentioned the fact that his nephew was expected in time for dinner that evening, she was able to hear the news without self-betrayal.

Lord Crawshull sent his motor-car to bring Harvey from the station, and met him in the hall with a cordial welcome. There was a noticeable likeness between the two men, although Harvey could never look so handsome or so dignified as his uncle.

"When did you reach England?" asked Lord Crawshull, as they stood talking a few minutes before Harvey went to his room to dress for dinner.

"Oh, I think it was about three weeks ago."

"I hope you have had a good time since."

"Very good, indeed, thanks," was the answer, and Lord Crawshull observed the difference which three years' absence had made in his nephew's bearing. He certainly appeared much more manly and independent than when he left England.

"By-the-bye, I have to felicitate you," said Lord Crawshull. "Since we met you have become a capitalist, and—er—a captain."

"Thanks, awfully," answered Harvey, and with that he went upstairs to change. Although there were no other visitors, Lord Crawshull did not suggest that this was unnecessary. At his own house he was exigent in all such matters, and although the two men dined alone the service was as elaborate as if there had been an important party. During the meal Lord Crawshull talked agreeably, giving Harvey some items of information, and repeating one or two rather scandalous anecdotes—fresh in consequence of his recent absence. The host was as courteous as if he had been entertaining a stranger, while Harvey was trying to make up his mind whether to touch on the purpose of his visit to-night after dinner, or to postpone the information until to-morrow morning.

"Now, what are your plans for the rest of the evening?" suggested his uncle presently. "Please yourself entirely. Don't think you are compelled to devote every moment to me directly you have landed. There's the billiard-room, or perhaps you prefer to lose no time in paying your respects to Mrs. Berkeley."

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"I think the billiard-room has it," said Harvey a little nervously.

He determined to get his task over before he slept, knowing, indeed, that sleep would be out of the question until it had been accomplished. Now that Harvey found himself at Torrington Place, some of the glamour which had pervaded his delightful intercourse with Sophy seemed to fade.

The plain fact remained that he was required to announce his intention to marry a girl who, whatever her charms and her virtues, had been picked up in the streets by Acton Marsh. To make this explanation to a cold-blooded, sarcastic man of the world such as Lord Crawshull appeared far from an enviable duty.

In the billiard-room Lord Crawshull lighted the one small cigar which he allowed himself every day. He was not a man who could be approached with any greater confidence after dinner. He never drank more than two glasses of the mildest hock, and the pleasures of eating presented no temptation to him. He had changed his evening coat for a black, silk-faced jacket, and now stood with his back to the fireplace, chalking a cue.

Instead of taking another, Harvey thrust his hands in his trousers pockets, and, coming

round towards Lord Crawshull, stood leaning against the edge of the table.

"I have something to tell you," he said, with the slightest of tremors in his voice, for it appeared that his entire future depended on Lord Crawshull's demeanour.

Lord Crawshull stepped to the table, rested his left hand on the cloth, took deliberate aim, and made a stroke.

"Been getting into a mess?" he suggested.

"Nothing of the sort," answered Harvey hastily. "The fact is, I am going to be married."

"Ah, you're not the first man who has found the voyage perilous," said Lord Crawshull.

"We—we didn't meet until after my arrival," Harvey explained.

"Rather melancholy, after surviving so much, to be wrecked—one may actually say—in port."

Harvey made a feeble attempt to smile as his uncle paused, as if for further information.

"I think you know Acton Marsh," said Harvey, turning to the rack, and selecting a cue in his excitement.

"A rising man, they tell me. Has Marsh painted the young lady's portrait?"

"Oh, well, yes——"

"That would seem to be of good augury," Lord 'Crawshull answered. "Marsh's prices must be fairly high."

"I should never think of money in such a connection," cried Harvey.

"Let me see, how old are you?" asked his uncle blandly.

"Twenty-eight."

"H'm, I suppose you wouldn't."

"She is a friend of Marsh's—she lives in his house," said Harvey, becoming more and more uncomfortable.

"Lives in his house!" cried Lord Crawshull, lifting his eyebrows slightly. "A relative, then?"

"No, she is not related to him."

"Yet she——"

"The fact is," Harvey blurted out, "Marsh knew—knew her when she was a child. She has no connections——"

"You will find that a mercy!"

"So he has seen to her education and all that sort of thing, you know."

"How old is the lady?" asked Lord Crawshull.

"She isn't twenty yet."

"Ah, and how old was she when Marsh first took her in hand?"

"Er—I fancy she was something like sixteen."

"You have not told me the name of your fiancée!"

It was the first time Harvey had wished that anything connected with Sophy might have been different.

"Sophy Bunce!"

"Bunce," said Lord Crawshull, and he made a dexterous cannon. "Bunce?—then I think I have seen her photograph."

"Where?" demanded Harvey.

"At the Chalmers's——"

"Oh yes, she was at a school in Brussels with Winifred Chalmers."

"Yet it can scarcely be the same," continued Lord Crawshull, "because I hear that Winifred's schoolfellow had a rather unusual history. Interested in floriculture—by-the-bye you haven't seen my begonias this year. Damn the begonias—I beg your pardon—they have cost me a small fortune."

"You have saved me the trouble of an explanation," cried Harvey, striving to recover his self-possession.

"Short cuts are generally the quickest," said his uncle. "Now you seem to have approached your—your interesting explanation by a somewhat roundabout path."

"Anyhow, you know the worst," was the answer. "For the rest, Sophy is the most beautiful girl in the world, and one of the best. No one can find a single fault with her——"

"My dear boy, who would wish to criticise a pretty woman! Nothing could be more misplaced."

"I don't care a hang for her antecedents," cried Harvey. "I know what she is——"

Lord Crawshull rested one hand above the other on the tip of his cue, as he leaned upon it regarding Harvey with a bland expression.

"'Kind hearts are more than coronets,' " he quoted, "'And simple faith than Norman blood.' "

"I am not the man to be put off with a sneer!" exclaimed Harvey, stung well-nigh to fury.

"A man!" was the answer. "You are the veriest boy. It is your excuse."

"No excuse is in the least necessary."

"Oh, come, but surely it is. Try to look at the case sensibly. Your wife, unless I find one for myself, will some day be Lady Crawshull. Her son would be my successor. You realise the importance of your choice, and you ought to realise that you owe something to your country. *Noblesse oblige*, you remember.

Yet you suggest marrying a girl whom this painter friend of yours picked up as a flower-seller in the street, and who has lived in his house——”

“I refuse to hear a word——” began Harvey, when his uncle suavely interrupted him.

“You have silenced me,” said Lord Crawshull. “I am dumb. In mentioning your intentions, it wasn’t unnatural to suppose you were inviting my opinion. Your intentions, I say—for, of course, I can’t prevent you from going to the devil in your own peculiar way. I might stop the hundred or so I allow you, but I shan’t. Now you have means of your own, it would make no difference one way or the other. Am I to understand that you have definitely committed yourself?”

“The affair is in abeyance for the moment,” Harvey was unfortunately constrained to admit. “The fact is, that Marsh insists on your recognition before he gives his consent.”

Lord Crawshull raised his eyebrows again.

“Won’t she marry you without it?”

“It will make things easier if you prove tractable,” said Harvey.

“Tractable! You expect me to return good for evil. I am a man of settled habits—unsettled, you would say,” he added; “well,

we won't argue about a word. At any rate, I have no wish to alter my course so late on the voyage, and you can't expect me to feel very tolerantly to the man who compels me."

"As far as I am concerned——"

"My dear Harvey," said Lord Crawshull, "don't let us have the least ill-feeling. You have the power to go your own way, but, on the other hand, I have my duty to do. It will not be an agreeable duty, but I draw a line. If you marry Miss—Miss Bunce, my course is plain, if inconvenient. I also shall have to become a Benedick."

Lord Crawshull's tone was quite convincing. Although he made another stroke the next instant, ignoring his nephew's presence completely, Harvey believed that he might easily prove as good as his word. Indeed, it seemed a perfectly natural thing in any circumstances for Lord Crawshull to marry, whereas it must inevitably make all the difference in the world to Harvey if he had a son.

In that case, instead of the exalted career, ready-made, to which Harvey had now for some time looked forward, his position would never be much better than it was at present; and although one might live, it was true, on eight hundred a year besides his pay, one

could live far more agreeably on eight thousand. Not that Lord Crawshull's politely expressed threat made Harvey any less eager to make Sophy his wife. To attain that end he would probably have sacrificed all that he possessed, or ever stood to possess, however sincerely he might regret the sacrifice later on.

"If you were only to see Sophy," cried Harvey, "your objections would vanish like smoke."

"Ha!" said Lord Crawshull.

"You have only to know her to—to like her," Harvey persisted, being not in the mood to choose his words very carefully.

"My dear fellow," was the answer, "I am prepared to—to like her, as you put it, after having seen only her photograph—thanks to Winifred Chalmers, poor girl."

"If you would only go to Ivanoff Road," urged Harvey, "and have a few words with Marsh——"

"With all the pleasure in the world!" cried Lord Crawshull.

"You will go to see Sophy!" said Harvey, as his hopes began to revive.

"To tell you the truth," continued Lord Crawshull, half-closing his eyes as he stood looking into Harvey's face, "I had more than

half a mind to drop in at Marsh's studio in any event, though it's some time since I spoke to him last. Winifred awakened my curiosity—I should rather like to have an opportunity of seeing this paragon! If you really don't mind paving the way, I might run up to London the day after to-morrow."

Harvey immediately began to loathe the notion of the suggested visit, and Sophy's deliberate inspection. And yet, unless Lord Crawshull saw her, Marsh might create a great deal of trouble, and perhaps influence her to reject his addresses.

The interview which had been regarded as indispensable now appeared as a degradation, and, having had quite enough of Lord Crawshull's society for the moment, Harvey laid aside his unused cue.

"You don't think it's too late," cried his uncle, as he walked to the door.

"For what?"

"I had the idea that you might be bent on a stroll to Mrs. Berkeley's," said Lord Crawshull, and as the door was shut rather violently, he stared at it with an expression which by no stretch of imagination could be described as pleasant.

CHAPTER XIV

UNCERTAINTY

BEFORE Harvey Redford at last fell asleep in the small hours, he determined to travel back to London the following afternoon, to lose no time in going to Ivanoff Road and seeing Acton Marsh, and, if fortune favoured him, Sophy also. He would prepare them both for Lord Crawshull's visit, and surely even so hardened a sinner as his uncle was generally admitted to be, must confess that of all the women in the world she was the best fitted to marry his nephew.

But before Harvey returned to London and Regent's Park, he perceived the absolute necessity to face Grace Berkeley—at least if he wished to retain a shred of self-respect. As it was, this had a tendency, as far as Grace was concerned, to dwindle to zero; but Harvey determined that he at least would not show the white feather; he would "cheek the thing out" at the cost of no matter what humiliation.

Fortune favoured him, inasmuch as he was saved from an interview with Mrs. Berkeley, and at first he thought he was destined not to see even Grace alone, for as he reached the gate of the small house, she was talking to Philip Chalmers, who did not in the least resemble his sister Winifred. He was almost as tall as Harvey, a year younger, fair-haired, frank, and pleasant looking, and he certainly appeared to be on the best of terms with Grace. They were on the point of going to the back-garden, where a lawn-tennis net hung limp, as Harvey accosted them. Both Grace and Philip had racquets in their hands, and Philip at least regarded the intruder with anything but a welcome expression.

For a moment Grace's face turned crimson as she held out her hand; it was hateful that she could not control her colour, but at least she tried to smile as if she had not a care in the world.

"When did you arrive?" she cried cheerfully.

"Only yesterday."

"Is it just a flying visit?" she asked, trying hard to show no particular interest.

"Well, it is," he answered rather awkwardly. "The fact is, I'm off this afternoon."

"You must have met Mr. Chalmers," she cried. "Captain Redford," she added, and the two men touched their caps and nodded.

"Afraid I must be cutting," said Philip the next moment, for he knew more about Harvey than Harvey knew about him.

"Oh, then, I shan't get a game——"

"This afternoon, you know," he answered, "Agnes said I was to bring her round."

"Well, don't forget," exclaimed Grace brightly, and, as Philip turned away, she walked by Harvey's side towards the net. "Sorry mother has gone to Castlemore this morning—the weekly shopping, you know," she added.

"Is Mrs. Berkeley all right?" asked Harvey, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"Oh, she is splendidly well. We both enjoy being here so much better than in London. We see a good deal of the Chalmers. By-the-bye," she summoned courage to inquire after a short silence, "have you met Acton Marsh?"

"Grace," cried Harvey, unable to control himself any longer, "I feel like a brute!"

"Because you have neglected him!" she asked, turning with a smile.

"Because I—I have neglected you."

"You call it neglect!" she cried. "Yet

you only arrived last night, and you have come to see us early this morning. Now, it strikes me as the most noble attention."

For a moment he wondered whether she had really a sincere desire to ignore all that had passed between them, and oddly enough he did not like the blow to his vanity, especially as the change might be due to Philip Chalmers. But a moment's consideration warned him that she must be making a virtue of necessity, and he soon perceived that there was something almost feverish in her gaiety. It struck him as unnatural.

"So you have seen Mr. Marsh," she answered. "And his protégée, how is she?"

"Grace," he said, with the most melancholy of faces, "I—I have asked her to marry me." They were close to one of the poles of the lawn-tennis net, and Grace rested both hands upon it for support.

"Hasn't she had the discretion to consent?" she asked, after the briefest of pauses.

"Everything is in embryo——"

"Then that is why you are a knight of rueful countenance!"

"Grace——"

"You must let me congratulate you," said Grace hastily. "Mother will be immensely

interested. We both admired Miss Bunce so much. I think she is quite the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. You will probably travel with Winifred," she added. "She is going to London this afternoon. She will be calling at Ivanoff Road—she is a great friend of Miss Bunce, you know."

"I wish to goodness you would say something annihilating," cried Harvey.

"But why?"

"For heaven's sake be natural," he urged. "I—I can't stand this—this sort of thing. After the last time we saw each other!"

"Wasn't that just before you left England?" she asked reflectively.

"I have forgotten no more than you," he said. "And I see the beast I am making of myself, but I can't help myself—upon my soul, I can't."

"Help yourself! Why should you?"

"You know very well why, Grace."

Grace slowly shook her head: "You are making a mountain out of a molehill," she insisted. "If I remember correctly, you asked me to—what was it exactly—in some indefinite way you suggested I should wait for you—was that your expression?—until you returned home. But I positively declined! Of course the idea

was ridiculous. One does not take every man seriously, you know. It is rather a pity when men take themselves seriously on their part, I think."

She really had no desire to punish him, only to save her own face, but, as a matter of fact, she made Harvey writhe almost more painfully than Lord Crawshull had done last night, and if she could not succeed in convincing him she made him feel like a man of very small account. But when he had gone away, longing for the time to leave Torrington, Grace stole upstairs, with a bowed head, and when Mrs. Berkeley returned from Castlemore she found her daughter lying on the bed where she had sobbed herself to sleep.

After all the unpleasantnesses which Harvey Redford had endured since he left London the previous day, he honestly considered that he deserved to be rewarded by the sight of Sophy this evening. In the meantime, he beguiled the two hours' journey by trying to conjure up her image in his mind, with the result that he forgot Lord Crawshull's detestable jeers, and almost succeeded in putting Grace out of his thoughts also.

But on arriving at Ivanoff Road he met with disappointment. The door was opened by

Mary, whom by this time he was beginning to know.

"Miss Bunce?" asked Harvey.

"Will you come to the studio, sir?" was the answer.

"I want to see Miss Bunce—not Mr. Marsh," said Harvey.

"If you will walk this way, sir," returned the housemaid; and with that she led Harvey to the studio, switched on the electric light, and left him alone, while, according to her instructions in the event of his visit, she went to tell Acton.

He entered the studio a few minutes later, offered a perfunctory hand, and indicated a seat. It was an undoubted fact that Acton had thought of Harvey with less friendly feelings than usual during the last day or two, and perhaps he had an inclination to be a little unnecessarily exacting.

"Well, did you see Lord Crawshull?" he asked.

"I left him this afternoon," was the answer.

"Did he approve of your purpose?"

"Anyhow, he is coming to London tomorrow, and I said he could see Sophy at four."

"I will ask her to stay at home," muttered Acton, without any sign of satisfaction.

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"You won't mind my speaking to her this evening," cried Harvey, but Acton slowly shook his head.

"Better wait until we know where we stand——"

"There's not the slightest question about that in my mind," said Harvey.

"A good deal in mine," was the answer. "To begin with, Sophy has not given you her decision, and then, although your uncle is coming, I imagine his object is to make a kind of inspection—you don't assure me of his approval."

"You know as well as I do," exclaimed Harvey, "that to see Sophy is all that's necessary. No man on earth can find a fault with her. Upon my soul, Marsh, you seem inclined to make things as difficult as you can."

Acton was silent for a moment, and his conscience troubled him.

"I can promise you this," he said. "If Lord Crawshull sees Sophy, and gives me reason to believe that he will treat her as she has the right to be treated, I will not attempt to influence her."

Harvey was compelled to remain dissatisfied with this decision, and, taking his hat, feeling not a little sore against Acton, he stepped towards the door.

"I shall come to-morrow evening," he cried, as he turned the handle.

"Very well, at about the same time as to-night," said Acton, and then rising lazily he rang the bell for Mary to show Harvey out of the house. On hearing the street-door shut, he rang again, and when the housemaid reappeared he asked her to send Sophy to the studio.

She came in a few minutes, with a slight expression of curiosity, but with no sign of anxiety on her face.

"You can guess who has been and gone away again?" said Acton; but, instead of making haste to inquire what had happened during Harvey's visit, she drew closer to Acton, with a half-coaxing expression.

"If we are going to talk," she cried, "let us go into the smoking-room." It seemed that all their most important conferences had taken place therein. "It's ever so much nicer," she persisted, and, after a momentary hesitation, he walked towards the studio door.

The cool evening air came in through the open window, and, taking a chair, Sophy rested an arm on the sill, while Acton stood in his favourite attitude against the mantel-shelf.

"Aren't you going to smoke?" she sug-

gested, and he turned, feeling about in a half-dazed manner for his pipe and tobacco.

"Now," he said, striking a match, "I should have imagined you would have been overcome by anxiety to hear the result of Redford's journey to Torrington."

"I wonder whether he saw Winifred!" she cried.

"Well, he was scarcely in a mood to talk of her if he did," answered Acton. "So you don't feel particularly anxious?" he added.

"Of course," she returned, "I should like to know what is going to happen to me!"

"Anyhow, things have got as far as this. Lord Crawshull is coming here at four to-morrow afternoon."

He saw the colour dye her cheeks, as she faced him with obvious excitement.

"To see me?" she cried.

"Well—yes, though I dare say I shall have a look in before he goes."

No doubt she was a little carried away by the prospect of the interview. Harvey, it is true, would probably become Lord Crawshull one day, but his uncle occupied that exalted rank already. It would at least be a new experience; Sophy had never come into contact with a peer hitherto, and certainly she

began to look forward with considerable curiosity and eagerness. "As Lord Crawshull is coming," she cried suddenly, "I—I suppose he doesn't object."

"As a matter of fact," answered Acton, "it is a visit of inspection. No doubt he pumped Harvey, and found out all about you. Now he wishes to see for himself what you're like; so you ought," he added, forcing a smile, "to be on your very best behaviour."

"I shall," she cried significantly, and Acton, himself no respecter of persons, for once found it rather difficult to seize her precise point of view. If an older or a plainer or a less well-beloved person had shown Sophy's tendency, he would have written her down a snob; but, with a desire to find her as perfect in character as in face and form, he endeavoured to account for what appeared to be somewhat of a weakness. It perplexed him that Crawshull's title should predispose her in the man's favour, yet he could not persuade himself that Sophy was other than favourably disposed.

But he reminded himself of her childish dreams and aspirations a few years ago, and how at that time she had seemed to long for all manner of wonderful things, although when questioned on the subject she could never tell

him of any definite desire. And as then she used to talk of magic horses and magic carpets, which should waft her away to mysterious realms where all one's wishes might be gratified, so now she had merely altered her mode of expression. She understood as little about her present ambition as about the geography of those marvellous countries, and to her calculating yet unsophisticated mind, Lord Crawshull and the like represented the unknown ideal for which she yearned.

For her own part, Sophy did not for a moment doubt that she should create a favourable impression. Already as she sat by the open window of the smoking-room, she was trying to decide which of her few dresses she should wear. She wished indeed that she were the happy possessor of jewellery—even a watch and chain, a simple locket, or a bangle. But the desirability of such adornments had never occurred to Acton, and he had not the remotest suspicion of the immense gratification which the smallest gift of the kind would have caused her. She always looked perfectly well-dressed, as far as he could see, and it really did not matter what she wore. For the asking, she might have had whatever she pleased; but Sophy could not ask for that sort of thing, and

Acton had never ceased to experience a delicacy in proffering even the money for her casual needs. So that during her walks abroad with Captain, she would stop before many a suburban jeweller's shop, and gaze long and perhaps a little covetously at the windows. She looked at the rings and brooches, and her eyes shone as she saw the diamonds and emeralds and sapphires separated from her only by a thin sheet of plate-glass.

So it may have been that Sophy's aspirations had become to some degree more definite than Acton imagined, though still as certainly as ever there was that which she esteemed as far above rubies.

It appeared that her wishes followed two parallel courses, and fain would she have walked between, stretching forth a hand to each. The two need not necessarily have conflicted, for in truth she would have been by no means difficult to satisfy. On the one hand were love and the sweet pleasures of domestic life with Acton, on the other the longing to rise as high above her original condition as the fates permitted.

If untoward circumstances had not cut her off from the first gratification, this would have doubtless mitigated the second, although even in

that case she would probably have given a spur to Acton's ambition ; for she could perceive that he might have become more famous if he had chosen to bestir himself. But this channel having been unhappily blocked, it seemed that the other became more turbulent. Success was all that was left to her, and at present her only opportunity of pursuing it had been by means of Harvey Redford.

"Is Lord Crawshull really nice?" she inquired.

"I have no doubt you will find him so," was the answer. "I—I promised Harvey that I would not attempt to bias your decision," he added.

"Still," she cried, "you would rather I decided against him?"

"Upon my soul," answered Acton, with half-suppressed emotion, "I am trying to school myself to wish only what will make you the happiest."

She looked up quickly.

"You don't think this would make me happy?" she suggested.

Acton shrugged his shoulders.

"That depends on one's standard," he muttered.

"I should like to live in a constant whirl,"

she said rather excitedly, "with never a moment to think of anything that has ever happened to me. I wish one could lose one's memory, and yet—no, I don't," she exclaimed, "because there wouldn't be anything left worth having. You know," she continued, "I shall always look back, and if ever I feel miserable I shall try to make myself believe I'm here again with you. I shall see you standing there just as you always do, with a hand on your chin, as if your face were not long enough already, and I hope I shall often dream of it."

"Well," he answered, "don't you think it's time you began to dream to-night," and he took his watch from his waistcoat pocket.

Sophy sighed as she rose and bade him good-night, and alone in her room her thoughts took an unusual direction. She began to wonder what his wife was like, and whether he had really been ever very fond of her, and it seemed bewildering to imagine that he had been married years before she crossed his path. A little dangerously she tried to think of what she should do if she were destined to become his wife, as unfortunately she was not, for it seemed almost certain that this time to-morrow would find her engaged to be

married to Harvey Redford. She had read of heirlooms in the shape of wonderful jewels, and she wondered whether Lord Crawshull would wish her to wear some at once, and when she lay down in bed, and her thoughts showed a tendency to wander back to Acton, she found herself deliberately directing them to the advantages to be enjoyed by Harvey's wife, she heard herself addressed as "my lady," and then she heard nothing further until Mary knocked at her door the following morning.

CHAPTER XV

RIGHT ABOUT FACE

ON coming downstairs to breakfast, Sophy rejoiced to see on her plate a letter from Winifred Chalmers, her only correspondent. Winifred had written regularly once a week since the day she parted from Sophy at Victoria Station, and now she sent important news.

"Winifred is coming at half-past ten," cried Sophy, "to spend a long morning with me!"

"Half-past ten is certainly a little early for a visitor," suggested Mrs. Wormauld.

"She tried," continued Sophy, with her eyes still on the letter, "to get here all yesterday, and she is going back to Torrington to-morrow."

Mrs. Wormauld turned towards Acton.

"If you would like me to be at home to receive Lord Crawshull this afternoon," she said, "I shall be happy to put off going to my sister's."

"Oh, pray don't do that," cried Sophy, eager to get rid of her for the occasion.

"I intend to be home by half-past three," answered Acton, who had arranged to lunch at his club with one or two men. "And," he added, "when Sophy has finished with Lord Crawshull, Mary can bring him to me in the studio."

Sophy was watching at the drawing-room window when Winifred reached Ivanoff Road at the appointed hour, and, having been kissed several times, the visitor was taken to Sophy's bedroom.

As she raised her arms to remove a pin from her hat, she suddenly found Sophy clinging to her with considerable excitement.

"Winifred," she murmured, "I—I think—I am going to be married."

"Don't you know for certain?" asked Winifred, to whom it certainly appeared that there ought to be no doubt on such a subject.

"I—I suppose I do——"

"To Mr. Marsh?" said Winifred, and Sophy hid her face on her confidante's shoulder.

"N—no," she faltered.

"Who is it, then?"

"Some one you know," said Sophy.

Winifred stood with a perplexed expression on her plain face, her forehead wrinkled, and her lips pressed thoughtfully together.

"I give it up," she answered. "Only don't forget that whoever he is I am to be your bridesmaid."

"Captain Redford," said Sophy. "He will be Lord Crawshull some day, and his uncle is coming to see me this afternoon."

Without being very exacting in the matter of congratulations, Sophy could not help marvelling at the solemn manner in which her announcement was received.

"Don't you like Captain Redford?" she demanded.

"Oh yes—what little I know of him. Of course, I haven't seen him since he came home from India this time."

"Then why don't you say something, Winifred?"

"I felt so immensely astonished!"

"Why?"

"But then," said Winifred, "perhaps I made a mistake. You see, he is a very old friend of Grace Berkeley's—a very old friend," she added significantly.

"You mean that he was fond of her?" asked Sophy.

"Of course, that's no reason why he shouldn't be just as fond of you now," suggested Winifred ingenuously.

Sophy fixed her eye on a small cat's-eye brooch which Winifred happened to be wearing, and wished she possessed one like it.

"Still he—you are certain—he used to be fond of Miss Berkeley?" she inquired.

"Anyhow, my mother heard all about it from Mrs. Berkeley," said Winifred.

"Was she—was she fond of him?"

"Oh yes, I'm quite certain about that."

"Then why didn't they become engaged before he went back to India?" demanded Sophy.

"Why, because Captain Redford hadn't come into his money at that time," was the answer. "I always thought they quite understood each other," added Winifred.

"Yet," suggested Sophy, "he didn't go to Torrington when he landed?" Winifred soberly shook her head:

"I suppose that was because he came here and saw you," she said.

Already Sophy was coming to the conclusion that her position required at the least reconsideration. When she had taken her friend downstairs, the remainder of the morning was devoted to an endeavour to ascertain the precise degree of Grace's affection for Harvey Redford. A fellow-feeling makes one

wondrous kind, and after Sophy had kissed Winifred a great many times, and finally parted from her at the gate, she began to exalt Miss Berkeley into a kind of suffering heroine, and to feel, certainly, very sorry for her.

Towards Harvey, however, she did not feel a moment's indignation, and indeed she regarded him now chiefly in the light of his relation to Grace, whose feelings she believed she could accurately imagine.

For Grace seemed to be doomed not only to lose the man she loved, but to see him appropriated by another woman. That must be the last straw! That must be unendurable! And for her own part, Sophy had the strongest disinclination to become a party to such a lamentable transaction.

There were plenty of other men in the world without robbing Grace, to whom Harvey might return if Sophy dismissed him. By the time the gong sounded for luncheon, she became conscious of a sense of exhilaration such as she had not felt for some days. She looked in at the studio on the chance of finding Acton, who had, however, some time ago set forth to his club.

Really there was no longer the slightest necessity for Lord Crawshull's visit, although

Sophy did not pretend she would have wished it to be put off. In fact, she felt capable of enjoying it the more completely, and she spent longer over her toilet than usual. Without being remarkably vain, she could not be blind to her own beauty, while she perceived that she looked her very best this afternoon. Even when she had been a child going backwards and forwards to school she was conscious of the notice she attracted, and nowadays she often found it desirable to whistle Captain closer to her side as she took her walks abroad.

Realising that beauty is a power in the world, she had an unsatisfied longing to exert it. Taking a seat in the drawing-room after Mrs. Wormauld's departure, Sophy began to wonder what Lord Crawshull would be like, and his entrance caused an agreeable surprise. At least he was the most distinguished-looking man she had ever seen, whereas it would be libellous to describe him as old. As Mary closed the door, Sophy rose to receive him.

"So I am compelled to go through the ceremony of introduction for myself," he said, with a smile, as he gazed into her eyes.

"Of course I should have known who you were," answered Sophy, "even if Mary

hadn't announced you. And you knew who I was!"

The ingenuousness which no amount of training would ever quite remove had a peculiar charm for this experienced man of the world. Lord Crawshull from the outset regarded her as a piquant morsel. A connoisseur of women, he told himself that he had never before beheld such a face, nor such a delightful shape. He came to Ivanoff Road to combine business with pleasure. At any time he felt prepared to take a little trouble to look at a charming woman, while this afternoon he intended to make it quite plain to Acton Marsh that nothing on earth could induce him to countenance Harvey Redford's marriage. And from what his nephew had said, Lord Crawshull almost hoped that a frank expression of opinion might settle the question.

"Have you seen Harvey since his return from Torrington?" he inquired.

"No," said Sophy, "but he is coming this evening."

"Upon my word you make me feel inclined to envy him," answered Lord Crawshull.

"Do I?" she cried, and then, becoming suddenly struck by the ludicrous turn of events, Sophy began to laugh.

"I confess," said Lord Crawshull, "I should like to be in a position to share your amusement."

"Of course," exclaimed Sophy, "you think I intend to marry Captain Redford." As she spoke she heard Acton enter the house.

"Well, he certainly left me with that impression."

"I'm not going to marry him," said Sophy.

"The fellow is not half worthy of you," was the answer. And for once Lord Crawshull felt completely astonished.

"Oh, it isn't that," she explained; "only I have heard about Miss Berkeley."

"So Harvey's sins are coming home to roost, and you stipulate for a virgin heart?"

"I don't intend to make any one miserable," she said, and Lord Crawshull could not repress a sound which resembled a chuckle.

"Not even yourself?" he suggested.

"Of course," she returned, "I have not known Captain Redford very long."

"Well," he said, "you haven't known me very long either; but there are few evils that cannot be alleviated. May I hope to see you again," he asked, bending slightly towards her.

"I suppose that isn't very likely—now," she answered, and he fancied that she sighed.

"I assure you," he exclaimed, "it is absolutely certain"; and it was scarcely to be wondered at if he assumed she would be a wife for any husband.

"You would like to speak to Mr. Marsh!" she suggested, as the visitor turned towards the table to take his hat.

"I imagine you have hindered the necessity!"

"Oh, but he will be disappointed not to see you," said Sophy; and, having summoned Mary, she instructed her to take Lord Crawshull to the studio. He held Sophy's hand for a moment in farewell, and she certainly thought that she had acquitted herself admirably in somewhat trying circumstances. Yet, Lord Crawshull passed out of her mind as soon as he left the room, and she became impatient to enlighten Acton concerning Captain Redford. Realising that he would probably learn the news from Lord Crawshull, she began to wish that she had displayed greater reticence, for she would have preferred to break it herself.

In the meantime Lord Crawshull was entering the studio:

"It is some time since we met, Mr. Marsh," he began; "I dare say you have forgotten me."

"My craft encourages a good memory for faces," was the answer.

"And the most excellent taste," said Lord Crawshull. "I have ceased to wonder at Harvey's infatuation."

"I have told him frankly," cried Acton, "that nothing can be done without your sanction."

"Well, I fully intended to treat you with similar candour, but that was before I had the pleasure of seeing Miss—er—Miss Bunce. But now she has taken the wind completely out of my sails—and out of Harvey's. I won't say my journey has been wasted, for I am far from feeling that, but—well, I am sorry for my unfortunate nephew."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Acton, with a trace of impatience, "I don't understand whether you approve or disapprove of Redford's engagement—if it should ever come to that!"

"It won't come to that, Mr. Marsh. Miss Bunce, it appears, has discovered the existence of Grace Berkeley, whom I think you know, consequently she declines to have anything further to do with Harvey."

After staring almost incredulously into Lord Crawshull's face for a few moments, Acton broke into a laugh:

"I haven't seen Sophy since this morning," he answered, "so you take me rather by surprise."

"No woman ever surprises me," said Lord Crawshull; and when he left the house a few minutes later, Acton went in search of Sophy, who, however, almost ran into his arms in the hall. Grasping her wrists impulsively he led her into the studio.

"Now," he demanded, shutting the door with his foot, "what have you been up to?"

"I suppose Lord Crawshull has told you," she answered, without the slightest effort to free herself.

"But I should like to learn the why and wherefore," said Acton, trying not to betray any sign of either pleasure or regret; trying, indeed, to continue to act as he had schooled himself to act since the day he heard of Harvey Redford's intentions. And Sophy, also playing a part, explained as calmly as might be what she had learned from Winifred.

"Then," suggested Acton, "you want to punish the fellow for his inconstancy—is that the notion?"

"Oh no," she cried, "I don't want to punish anybody; only, you see, I felt sorry for Miss Berkeley—and it didn't really make very much difference to me. I should hate to feel that I had taken him away from her."

"Still that seems to be an accomplished fact,"

said Acton. "You have taken him away, although you decline to keep him."

"I don't think I took him," answered Sophy quietly. "Captain Redford came of his own accord, and now I hope he will go back again."

"You imagine that Grace Berkeley would receive him?"

"Winifred told me she was very fond of him," said Sophy. And in her opinion that seemed to settle the question.

"Well," suggested Acton; "it will be better for me to see Harvey when he comes to-night——"

"Of course, I don't wish to see him," was the answer. "Only he may not be quite satisfied unless I do."

Acton gazed after her with a solemn expression as she left the studio, and when the door closed he could not help feeling appalled at the recklessness with which she seemed able to dispose of herself. For the present, it is true, she might be safe, but it was impossible not to be impressed by her callousness in dealing with the man whom a few hours ago she had seriously intended to marry, and whom she had now determined to dismiss. Whilst writhing at the idea that she could deliberately barter

herself, he fully recognised all the difficulties of her situation, and now that the notion had once entered her head he could not put aside the fear that, sooner or later, she might carry through a similar transaction. Nevertheless, Acton rejoiced that the present negotiation had failed, and scarcely deplored his approaching interview with Harvey Redford.

But Harvey was far too impatient to wait until nine o'clock that evening, and as soon as it seemed likely that Lord Crawshull had returned to Grosvenor Square, Harvey set forth in that direction.

Lord Crawshull usually spent one or two days a week at his London house, where the butler took Harvey at once to the long, narrow room known as the picture-gallery. Its contents were valued by their present incumbent as a proper appanage to his station rather than for their intrinsic merits. In one corner stood a small spinet, which had probably been played upon by some of the curiously-clad ladies now represented at life-size on the walls. There were rare cabinets, valuable china, books, statues and unique specimens of needlework.

Lord Crawshull did not keep his nephew long in suspense. He entered as the butler threw open the door, faultlessly dressed, with

the faintest of smiles on his lips, and the usual droop of his shoulders.

"You have seen Sophy?" cried Harvey, with the utmost eagerness.

"Ah, the impetuosity of youth," said Lord Crawshull indulgently. "Sit down, sit down, Harvey," and Lord Crawshull walked to one of the Chippendale chairs.

"You—you saw her!" exclaimed Harvey, far too excited to think of sitting down. †

"I went to Ivanoff Road as I promised," was the answer. "An out-of-the-way locality, but then one may often find a gem in an unimagined place, you know."

"You agree with me that she is the most beautiful girl in the world!" cried Harvey, growing more and more hopeful.

"Charming—charming. I told her you were not half good enough for her."

Harvey took a few steps towards his uncle's chair.

"Upon my word, I am immensely grateful to you," he answered, accepting the intimation as entirely favourable.

"You have nothing to thank me for, my boy!"

"Did you tell Marsh you would come to our wedding?" asked Harvey.

"Now, now, it wasn't necessary to go so far as that," was the reply; "but you may take it that Marsh and I entirely understand each other."

"I felt certain," said Harvey, "that you had only to see Sophy——"

"To envy my nephew!" cried Lord Crawshull. "I am prepared to agree with all that even you can say in her favour. The name of Bunce, perhaps——"

"We shall soon change that!"

"As you say, doubtless that will not be found difficult to remedy. What time is your appointment with the young lady?"

"After dinner this evening."

"Well, I have too great a dislike to anything of the nature of excitement at meal times to suggest your dining here; but you must let me hear how you get along. I shall be at Torrington next week—I leave London early to-morrow morning."

Harvey thanked him effusively before he left Grosvenor Square, and as the door closed Lord Crawshull leaned back in his chair and chuckled with perfect contentment. He wished it were possible to be present at the little comedy which he had prepared for Harvey, but at least he could imagine the scene at

Ivanoff Road and thoroughly enjoy it. But he could not succeed in getting Sophy's face out of his mind that evening ; on the contrary, he thought of her again and again until the blood began to race through his veins, and it became necessary to warn himself against the danger of becoming as great a fool about the girl as his nephew.

CHAPTER XVI

A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR

HARVEY REDFORD looked radiant as he walked away from Grosvenor Square that afternoon, thinking far more favourably of Lord Crawshull than ever in his life before. Having reached his hotel in Jermyn Street he changed his clothes, dined, and took a hansom to Ivanoff Road, experiencing on the present occasion no misgiving when Mary conducted him to the smoking-room. He fancied that the clouds had cleared from Acton's face also.

"Well," said Harvey, trying to reduce his gratification to suitable limits, "so all your doubts about Sophy's reception have vanished into thin air."

"Quite!" was the answer.

"I knew that Crawshull had only to see her!" cried Harvey.

"Even that seems to have been a wasted effort," said Acton.

"Oh, well, it's true he had seen her photo-

graph," Harvey returned, "but after all that isn't entirely the same thing. No photograph could do Sophy anything like justice."

Acton gazed into Harvey's radiant face with considerable bewilderment.

"You haven't seen Lord Crawshull since he left me this afternoon," he suggested.

"Why, yes," answered Harvey, adding with a smile, "the most agreeable conversation we have ever had. He even forgot to sneer."

"Still he doesn't appear to have told you——"

"He told me that he offered no objection to my marriage."

"Well, you see," said Acton, beginning to feel a little sorry for Harvey Redford, "any objection would have been entirely gratuitous——"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Sophy told Lord Crawshull she would not marry you," was the answer.

"Good heavens!" gasped Harvey.

"I had not seen her since the early morning. Winifred Chalmers spent two or three hours here, then came your uncle. It was from him I learned of Sophy's determination."

"But there—there must be some infernal mistake!" exclaimed Harvey.

"The simple explanation is," continued Acton, "that Miss Chalmers let out about Grace Berkeley, and on the strength of the disclosure Sophy made up her mind."

Harvey stood biting his lip in uncomfortable silence a few moments.

"I can't understand it," he muttered presently. "My uncle led me to believe——"

"My dear fellow, Lord Crawshull was pulling your leg."

"I must see Sophy," cried Harvey impetuously.

"Now, what on earth is the good," urged Acton. "I assure you she won't change her mind, and what will you gain by piling up the agony?"

"Anyhow, I must see her," said Redford; and he continued to insist so strongly on the point that Acton perceived the necessity of yielding.

"Very well," he returned, "I will send her to you here." Going in search of Sophy, he found her in the middle of a lesson in bridge from Mrs. Wormauld in the drawing-room.

"Do you mind my interrupting you for a minute," he said; and Sophy rose, accompanying him to the studio, where he switched on the electric light. "I have tried to deal with

Harvey," Acton exclaimed, "but he refuses to be satisfied without seeing you."

"Oh dear; is he very angry?" she cried.

"Well, it is rather unfortunate," said Acton.

"Lord Crawshull doesn't appear to have enlightened him; he praised you so warmly, in fact, that Harvey assumed that everything was going to turn out just as he hoped."

"It was rather nice of Lord Crawshull to praise me," answered Sophy. "I suppose I must see Captain Redford," she added; and, turning away, she walked to the smoking-room, where Harvey awaited her with the most intense impatience.

"Sophy," he began impetuously, "I want you to listen while I explain things. There was never anything definitely arranged between me and Grace Berkeley——"

"Oh!" she cried, with a tantalising smile, "but I hope there will be."

"There's only one woman in the world for me," he answered. "There can never be another. It's true I used to have a boyish fondness for Grace—but the instant I saw you I knew I had met my fate."

"But you hadn't!" said Sophy.

"Yet the other day, when I told you I loved you——"

"You recollect what I said!" she retorted.

"A man can scarcely be blamed for changing his mind!"

"I have not dreamed of blaming you," she said. "Only, I have learned that Miss Berkeley is very fond of you, and why should I make her miserable?"

"If you cared for me ever so little," answered Harvey, "you couldn't speak in that way."

"But I told you frankly——"

"You at least promised to think of me kindly."

"Ah, yes," she said; "but if I had known about Miss Berkeley I shouldn't have hesitated for an instant."

With considerable difficulty he was beginning to seize her own point of view. It dawned upon him slowly that Sophy had contemplated marriage as a provision for her future, and that he had been simply a convenient means to that end. Making no further attempt to urge his cause, Harvey turned his back and went away, taking a hansom to a certain club where play ran high, and whose doors he had not entered since his return from India. There he stayed some time, and drank a great deal more than was good for him, finally returning to his hotel and going to bed without invoking

the faintest blessing on the head of Lord Crawshull.

When Acton Marsh rejoined Sophy a few minutes after Harvey's departure, he found her on the verge of tears — an unusual circumstance.

"I feel certain," she murmured, "that I made Captain Redford very miserable. He looked dreadful when he went away."

"A mistake from first to last," said Acton.

"From the first day I came here," she answered disconsolately.

"No, no; you mustn't say that!"

"Sometimes," she insisted, "I almost wish you had never seen me——"

"And that you had continued to live on as you were living," he suggested.

"I don't believe I should," she answered; "I never believed that. But I feel immensely sorry for Captain Redford."

"Oh, well," said Acton, "men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love, you know."

"You don't think they have?" she asked, looking up into his face abruptly.

"After all," he continued, as he filled his pipe, "the most of us have some kind of work to do in the world, and that tides us over."

We sit down at night and dream of suicide and all manner of undesirable things, but the next morning we put the idea aside and begin again the ordinary round. So we jog along, each with his own particular bundle on his back."

"Yes," said Sophy, "that's exactly what I tell myself. It's no use longing for the impossible things, is it? And so one puts up with whatever is possible."

"Captains — for instance," he muttered, rather grimly.

"I hope," cried Sophy, "that Captain Redford will make it up again with Miss Berkeley. I can imagine just how she feels. To know that any one you really love is going to marry some one else——"

"Ha!" muttered Acton.

Rising impulsively to her feet she came close to his chair. "What is there I can do?" she demanded; "tell me what I can do?"

"Let things slide," he answered recklessly; "don't think of flinging yourself away. Go along as you are—for the present, at all events."

"I can't," she said; "and you can't."

"But, good heavens! which is worse?"

"You can't help seeing which would be worse," she insisted.

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“To deliberately——”

She leaned excitedly forward, and at the same instant he was silenced by a soft hand on his lips. He perceived the undesirability of continuing the discussion, and a few minutes later Sophy quitted the room. They met the next day without any reference to Harvey or to the conversation which had followed his departure, although Mrs. Wormauld began to feel that a little greater strain on her curiosity would turn her brain.

Now that Harvey no longer paid frequent visits to the house, it seemed as if Sophy had gone back to the days before he crossed her path. While his presence had seemed to set up a kind of restraint between herself and Acton Marsh, she now permitted herself increased liberty—partly, perhaps, because of Acton’s impending departure. All that he would tell her concerning his plans was that he intended to move about from place to place for a month, his communications with home being as usual entirely cut off—a self-denying ordinance which yet appeared to be necessary.

“It must be delightful to travel,” she said, the night before his departure.

“By Jove!” he cried, “what a time we could have! What heaps of things I could

show you. But anyhow, you mustn't stagnate while I'm away. I have told Mrs. Wormauld to give you a round of theatres, and I hope you won't have a very bad time."

She smiled a little drearily, and when she came downstairs the next morning his bags were in the hall. Having to leave the house early, he had breakfasted alone, and now Sophy warned herself to bid him good-bye in the safe presence of Mrs. Wormauld. But when Mary came to the gate in a hansom, Sophy grew suddenly reckless, and throwing caution to the winds she made her way to the studio.

"You have a glorious morning!" she faltered.

"Ye—es," he answered, coming to meet her.

"I—I hope you will enjoy yourself," she said; and although she had formed the deliberate intention to separate herself from him for life, and had even felt impatient to see him depart on his month's holiday, she felt reluctant now the moment had come to let him leave her.

"Sophy," he cried, as her hand rested in his own, "I have more than half a mind to turn it up."

"No, no; please go," she murmured. But although he looked irresolute for an instant, his whole life had given him strength, and he left her there, with her neck bent, her eyes wet—an incongruous desire to paint her as she stood obtruding itself as he passed out of the studio. More than once on the way to the station he was half-tempted to direct the cabman back to Ivanoff Road, but conscience warned him of danger, and by no means for the first time he attempted to divert his thoughts by a consideration of the best means to procure Sophy's lasting welfare. He wished indeed that her happiness involved her continued presence beneath his roof, whereas he was driven more and more certainly to the conclusion that this could only entail the fate from which in the first place it had been his purpose to rescue her.

Was it possible that in weaker moments Sophy felt inclined to deplore his counsel of perfection? Her wish, in this regard, was of a less definite character, but she would have desired that circumstances rather than Acton had been different. As far as he was concerned, only the best could satisfy her, and to live with him unrespected would be worse than death. It was true that the ensuing month

would seem sufficiently long, but the four weeks must end at last, and all her present difficulties would again confront her. She could not see her way in the least, but still, before she slept on the night of his departure, Sophy firmly made up her mind that some definite plan must be formed before his return.

One afternoon Sophy was sitting with Mrs. Wormauld—it was the Monday after Acton's departure—when Mary opened the door, and to her great surprise announced Lord Crawshull, who bowed deferentially to her companion, sat down, and began at once to talk as if his visit were the most ordinary thing in the world.

He was too judicious to attempt any apology or explanation, and in fact Lord Crawshull had only waited until he thought that Acton would be safely out of the way. Nor had he come to Ivanoff Road with any definite purpose beyond a wish to see again the face which had haunted him since he looked upon it last. He wished to make certain that memory had not exaggerated Sophy's charms, and he had neither seen Harvey Redford since that afternoon in Grosvenor Square nor desired to see him.

"I met your friend Winifred Chalmers on

Saturday," he remarked while Sophy poured out the tea.

"Did she send me any message?" asked Sophy.

"I don't suppose she imagined I should have the good fortune to see you so soon," he answered. "Nobody worth knowing is in London just now——"

"That is not very complimentary," cried Sophy, whilst Mrs. Wormauld marvelled at her boldness.

"I can conceive nothing more unnecessary to you than a compliment," said Lord Crawshull, and then he turned towards Mrs. Wormauld. It appeared that some years ago he had had a friend of her name, and although she could not succeed in identifying that particular member of her late husband's family, she felt very greatly flattered notwithstanding the fact that she saw through his motive for ingratiating himself. Turning again to Sophy he inquired how she passed her time, seemed surprised to hear that Mr. Marsh was not in London, and, hearing that he had asked Mrs. Wormauld to take her often to the theatre during his absence, suggested a play and offered to procure the tickets. And although Mrs. Wormauld felt greatly embarrassed to

mention the question of payment, Lord Crawshull took her guinea and put it in his pocket entirely as a matter of course.

"You will see!" cried Mrs. Wormauld, after he had left the house, "Lord Crawshull intends to be there!"

"That will be rather nice," said Sophy, far less excited than her companion.

One of Lord Crawshull's footmen brought the tickets the next afternoon, and two evenings later Sophy set forth in a hired carriage, additionally contented with herself because Mrs. Wormauld had insisted upon lending her an old pearl necklace and a gold bangle. Before leaving her bedroom Sophy stood long before the looking-glass, disregarding the consummate beauty with which Nature had endowed her, but full of admiration for the borrowed jewels. As Mrs. Wormauld predicted, the curtain had only just risen when Lord Crawshull approached the empty stall next to Sophy's:

"Was it a severe shock to see me come in?" he inquired during the *entr'acte*.

"Not at all," she answered; "it wasn't even a faint surprise."

"Then you counted on your power of attraction?"

"Mrs. Wormauld suggested you would come," she said. "That was why you offered to take the seats."

"I see that your friend is wise in her generation," he retorted.

"Do you think," she demanded, "that it is a woman's duty to be foolish?"

"As far as you are concerned you ought to be precisely as you are—it is impossible to suggest an improvement. I little thought under what a load of indebtedness I should be placed by that nephew of mine."

"Poor Captain Redford," she murmured.

"Ah, poor Captain Redford, indeed!" he echoed, as the curtain rose for the second act.

"You must please be quiet," said Sophy; "I don't wish to lose a single word."

Lord Crawshull, however, paid little attention to what went on behind the footlights, but he came almost to the conclusion that Sophy must be his at any cost. Concerning the price to be paid he entertained little misconception, but he believed that she might be had at a price. Marriage was the condition—a thing he had rigorously set his face against. Although he had not positively decided yet, he felt that he was fast losing his power of resistance. He parted from her, hat in hand, at the carriage

door, and as the horse started Mrs. Wormauld turned to Sophy :

“ A delightful evening,” she said, “ and I feel convinced that Lord Crawshull will come to-morrow to inquire whether we reached home in safety.”

“ I hope he will,” was the answer.

CHAPTER XVII

WHILE THE CAT'S AWAY

MRS. WORMAULD, whose first expectations concerning Sophy had undergone a considerable change, began to regard her henceforth as a young lady of vastly increased importance. While she took the precaution to keep extremely close to her side, Mrs. Wormauld came to the conclusion that the girl might undoubtedly become the Countess of Crawshull if she pleased, and while it was true she had behaved in the most extraordinary manner towards Captain Redford, she could scarcely have the audacity to trifle with his more distinguished uncle. For he came on the day after the visit to the theatre, the ensuing fortnight saw him frequently at Ivanoff Road, and he sent Sophy huge baskets of flowers, which invariably drove her thoughts back to the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street.

If Mrs. Wormauld had known where to find Acton Marsh, she might have considered it her

duty to enlighten him concerning the state of affairs at home ; but his letters lay in a small pile on the hall table, and he had not written since he left London. A crisis appeared to be at hand, and when Lord Crawshull suggested that Mrs. Wormauld should bring Sophy to his house in Grosvenor Square to inspect his pictures and other treasures, there seemed to be no insurmountable objection. Indeed, on her own account Mrs. Wormauld felt extremely desirous to accept the invitation.

Everything connected with the visit proved a delight to Sophy, and she could not fail to perceive that this was the highest pinnacle she had as yet reached. Lord Crawshull received them in the hall, and leading the way to his picture-gallery began to point out its most valuable contents. Sophy had never imagined the existence of so many treasures before, and when presently he excused himself for a few minutes and returned with a footman who carried an enormous jewel-case, and this was opened to display a wealth of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls, and sapphires, she stood with her hands pressed to her bosom, her cheeks aglow with excitement, her lips parted, her eyes brighter than Lord Crawshull had ever seen them.

It almost seemed that at last she had entered the enchanted realms of her childish imagination, and when he took some of the gems from their cases and, holding them in shaky hands, humbly begged Sophy to put them on, she scarcely knew how to control her satisfaction.

Removing her black kid gloves Mrs. Wormauld fastened a string of diamonds round her neck, and very little persuasion was needed to induce her to take off her hat and place a tiara upon her head. Lord Crawshull led her to a mirror, and stood watching her face while she admired her temporary adornments.

"I wish," he whispered, "that I could persuade myself you would consent to wear them at your pleasure."

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Sophy, with a sigh; but Mrs. Wormauld on returning to Ivanoff Road thought it no less than her duty to dwell upon Lord Crawshull's now quite obvious purpose.

"Of course," she said, "you must understand that he almost asked you to marry him!"

"A miss," answered Sophy, with a laugh, "is as good as a mile."

"He will certainly follow up the subject at the first opportunity," Mrs. Wormauld insisted, "and it is just as well you should be prepared."

I must say," she added, "it is a heavy responsibility for me, and I sincerely wish Mr. Marsh would come home."

But Sophy thought otherwise. She seemed to have found the oblivion which, she had told Acton, she desired. She found herself able now and then to forget her great disappointment, while at last she thought she saw a way out of her difficulties.

She no more disliked Lord Crawshull than his nephew, although she certainly preferred him as he used to be a week or two ago, before he began to watch her with such intentness. But Acton's immediate return would only make the undertaking more troublesome, for even at present, when she chanced to wake in the middle of the night for instance, it appeared to be well-nigh impossible. At other times she tried to obtain satisfaction by contrasting her condition three years ago with what it promised to become three years—perhaps three months—hence. She imagined herself the mistress of the house in Grosvenor Square as well as that other of which she had heard at Torrington. She already saw herself reclining in the motor brougham in which Lord Crawshull was often driven to Ivanoff Road; she conceived a life of perpetual gaiety and

excitement with no dull moments for thinking of what might have been. Her cheeks tingled still when she thought of the jewels, which would necessarily become her own property, and for the rest everything would be easier if she could greet Acton on his return with the announcement of the accomplished fact.

Nevertheless she felt dismayed to picture the scene. She knew precisely how he would look when she went to the smoking-room to enlighten him. He would be leaning against the mantel-shelf, and he would raise his right hand to his moustache and pass it slowly down over his chin; he would gaze at her gravely and say something careless and indifferent. Sophy could easily imagine the interview!

But what if there were no news to tell him? What if she made up her mind to reject the imminent offer of Lord Crawshull's experienced heart? In that event things at Ivanoff Road would have to jog along just as they had done before Acton's departure, whereas Sophy felt that this would be impossible.

There was only the one way of escape, and in a sense she could not regard it entirely as an unpleasant way. She fixed her mind on material things—on the fine houses, the jewels, the carriages and horses, the motor

cars, above all, on the title; and when Lord Crawshull was driven to the house two days later, Sophy seeing him from the window wondered why Mary did not bring the visitor to the drawing-room as usual.

But Lord Crawshull's patience was well-nigh exhausted. Having set his heart on possession, he was prepared to pay a price to which he had not believed that any woman could tempt him. It was one of his trials that she often surprised him by her tantalising indifference, and the result of his conviction that he was about to make a fool of himself was a longing to accomplish the task at the earliest possible moment.

Sophy had never felt the remotest inclination to confide in Mrs. Wormauld, but when she entered the drawing-room with the exciting information that Lord Crawshull had asked to speak to her privately, and begged for permission to see Miss Bunce alone, Sophy threw her arms incontinently around Mrs. Wormauld's neck. Afraid lest tears should mar her beauty at this exacting moment, Mrs. Wormauld endeavoured to treat the matter lightly, and having restored Sophy to something approaching calmness, she went to fetch Lord Crawshull from the studio.

"I have the reputation of being a proud man," he began as soon as he and Sophy were alone together, "but now I am going to make the most humble petition. A man usually appears a little ridiculous when he tells a woman he loves her, and for that matter I suppose you are well aware of my condition already."

"I guessed you would ask me to marry you," she answered.

Lord Crawshull laughed somewhat cynically.

"Anyhow," he continued, "I have never asked a woman to be my wife until to-day. I shall stick to the phrase: I love you, and I hope you can give me a few crumbs of love in return."

"I am afraid I can't," said Sophy.

She was determined that at least there should be no misunderstanding, especially since Harvey Redford had seemed to reproach her a few weeks ago.

"Will you allow me to ask you an intimate question?" he urged.

"You may ask me anything," she exclaimed, "and I will answer you truly."

Her simple directness heightened his infatuation, nor did her candid admission cause him any deep disappointment. He knew too much of the world to be able to disregard their

discrepancy of age, while her behaviour with regard to Harvey encouraged the hope that he might succeed in gaining his most desired object.

"Is there anybody who stands before me?" he asked.

"Ye—es," answered Sophy, letting her eyes wander around the room anywhere but in Lord Crawshull's direction.

"Mr. Acton Marsh?" he snapped out rather viciously.

"How did you know?" she demanded; and for the moment she now looked into his face, which certainly wore a rather unpleasant expression.

"Of course," he said, "you are aware that Marsh has a wife——"

"Ah, yes," she murmured, and her bosom rose and fell quickly.

"If you afford me the opportunity I will teach you to love me," he cried. "I can give you a great position and make you envied among women. I can make you happy if you will marry me."

Sophy began to wonder whether there was only one formula to be employed in such cases, but she scarcely realised the precise manner of her own surrender, for the next instant she en-

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dured the ordeal of Lord Crawshull's embrace. He began to talk in an inconceivably nonsensical manner, calling her ridiculous names, but finally releasing her, pale, palpitating and frightened. He suggested ringing for Mrs. Wormauld, who entered the room with pre-arranged congratulations on her lips ; but when Lord Crawshull had gone away, Sophy wept on her breast, and the same evening shyly entreated that she might not be left alone with her too demonstrative lover the following morning.

After an agonising night Sophy rose in a condition of extreme excitement. Knowing that he intended to take her to select a ring, she tried to fix her thoughts on this delightful excursion, and she came to breakfast with a smiling face. Although Lord Crawshull resented Mrs. Wormauld's presence, he could only make the best of her company during the drive in the motor brougham to New Bond Street.

Imagine Sophy, who had never possessed a single article of jewellery in her life, standing at the counter of one of the most fashionable shops in London, with the proprietor at hand to direct attentive assistants to display his most precious wares ; Mrs. Wormauld, with envy at her heart on one side, Lord Crawshull

animated by the most extravagant intentions on the other—for the purchase was by no means to be limited to a single engagement ring. Trays of brooches were put before her to choose what she pleased—bracelets, watches, chains; and Lord Crawshull chuckled when a merry ripple of laughter broke from Sophy's lips, and he insisted that her somewhat liberal selection should be there and then carried away.

He earned Mrs. Wormauld's lasting gratitude by requesting her to favour him by selecting a ring for her own use; and it was perhaps thanks to this gift that Sophy found herself alone with Lord Crawshull for ten minutes on her return to Ivanoff Road.

"Well," he asked, "are you pleased with the result of our first morning?"

"You have been very good to me," she answered.

"This is only a foretaste," he insisted; "I intend to be good to you as long as I live. But don't you think I deserve something in return?"

Understanding what was expected she raised her lips and pecked at Lord Crawshull's cheek. Upstairs in her bedroom later on, she arrayed herself in all her fresh ornaments; she examined

them separately and together, and at least perceived that it would be heart-rending to part with them.

Indeed, Sophy knew that the die had now been irrevocably cast. There was to be no turning back! Had she not a great career before her? She would be able to have everything she could possibly desire—except one thing, which in any event seemed to be forbidden. Sophy tried to put the thought of it resolutely aside, and determined to surrender herself to the experiences of which the next few days were full to overflowing.

CHAPTER XVIII

COMING HOME

ACTON MARSH in the meantime had been wandering restlessly from place to place with a continual necessity to resist the temptation to return before his month expired to England. No day passed without many thoughts of Sophy. He felt concerning her a great responsibility, and a strong desire to bring home to her mind the conviction that marriage was not the only way out of her difficulty.

When, however, the month had passed, still without perceiving any alternative, he began to think seriously of returning, and supposed that he ought to write to warn Mrs. Wormauld of his arrival. But habitually careless about such matters, he left her unprepared, and finally reached the London terminus at a quarter to ten one evening, taking a cab to his own house in Ivanoff Road. On his way through Paris in the Rue de la Paix one day he saw a gold brooch in a shop window, and came to the

conclusion that it would be suitable for Sophy. It was an ordinary thing to carry home a present after a holiday, and it dawned upon him that she must be destitute of such ornaments.

It was a small affair, costing only a few pounds, but nevertheless Acton looked forward a little recklessly to the pleasure of its bestowal, and took the precaution to put it in his waistcoat pocket, so that he might present it the evening of his return.

Alighting from the cab, he noticed nothing unusual in the appearance of his house, although perhaps there was a more brilliant illumination than usual in the drawing-room. He rang the bell, smiled at Mary's expression of astonishment, and asked her to look after his bags.

"I suppose Miss Bunce is in the drawing-room with Mrs. Wormauld?" he asked, hanging up his cap in the hall.

"Yes, sir, and Lord Crawshull."

No information could have astonished Acton more completely, and he began to wonder what on earth Mrs. Wormauld could be thinking about, since Crawshull would scarcely have come in the evening without a special invitation. But a still greater surprise remained in store for Acton when he opened the drawing-

room door. At one side of the fireplace, intent on the current number of *Punch*, sat Mrs. Wormauld, while Sophy was so transformed that for the moment he could scarcely believe his eyes.

Her dark-red dress, adapted under Mrs. Wormauld's superintendence, was cut low to show her neck and shoulders, while she seemed to glisten with diamonds. Lord Crawshull, in a chair very close to her side, rose abruptly, Sophy, carried away by her feelings, causing him a deep pang of jealousy.

"Oh, Acton, how delightful!" she cried, giving him both hands, on which he observed several valuable rings.

"Good-evening, Mr. Marsh," said Lord Crawshull.

"Good-evening," answered Acton, without any approach to cordiality.

"You did not write to prepare us for your return," said Mrs. Wormauld.

"I—I thought I would take you by surprise, as I have done."

"We have a—a surprise for you too," faltered Sophy, turning towards Lord Crawshull.

"Sophy," was his answer, "has done me the honour to promise to be my wife."

"Oh yes," muttered Acton.

"If I had known your address," said Mrs. Wormauld, "I should certainly have written to inform you some days ago."

"Perhaps," suggested Acton abruptly, looking straight into his guest's face, "you will come to my room for a cigar."

Lord Crawshull bowed with considerable dignity; and disregarding Mrs. Wormauld's fussy suggestion of a meal, Acton rang the bell for Mary to switch on the light in the smoking-room, whither he took Lord Crawshull a few minutes later.

"Thank you, I prefer not to smoke any more to-night," he said, in answer to Acton's invitation. "But don't let me hinder you—pray. I can understand," Lord Crawshull continued, with a peculiar intonation, "that my unexpected presence caused you some little surprise."

"It did," was the answer.

"Perhaps the circumstances of Sophy's position seem to entitle you to an explanation——"

"I think so."

"The facts," said Lord Crawshull, "are perfectly simple. As you are aware, I came here in the first place prepared to scoff; I remained

to pray for the favour of Sophy's hand. She has been entirely frank——”

“Concerning her parentage, you mean?”

“Concerning everything. I naturally don't care to discuss the lady who is to become my wife—very shortly, I trust. My solicitor will be happy to meet yours, and you won't find me niggardly in the matter of settlements. I think that is all I have to say, Mr. Marsh.”

Acton passed a hand rather wearily across his forehead, but he could not help admitting that he had indeed heard as much as he had any right to expect. At least, Lord Crawshull was not, as he had half feared, amusing himself at Sophy's expense. He opened the door, and Lord Crawshull returned to the drawing-room, while Acton sank into his chair and endeavoured to grasp the new situation in all its bearings. It was assuredly a vastly disappointing home-coming, but as usual he strove to survey the situation entirely from Sophy's own standpoint.

If in a sense he might have wished her to live forsaken and die forlorn, it became necessary to regard the affair from the point of view of common sense. This, however, was not Acton's ordinary method, and he made little pretence to be considered as a “man of the world.”

His business in life, as he conceived it, was to select what was beautiful, and to represent it in a manner which would influence the emotions of his fellows. In Sophy's union with Lord Crawshull there appeared to be something distinctly unlovely. It is true that Acton was scarcely an unbiased judge, but it was impossible to frequent a club and still to remain ignorant of Lord Crawshull's reputation.

Nevertheless, his friends would regard such a marriage as a *mésalliance*, while Sophy would doubtless become an object of envy. Remembering her antecedents, she would be said to have done remarkably well for herself, while, on the other hand, Acton was confronted by the question: What, if this marriage were prevented, could he possibly do for her?

Hearing Lord Crawshull leave the house, Acton wondered whether Sophy would come to his room as she had always liked to come; but after letting a quarter of an hour pass, he began to think she would not face him to-night. Then he heard the handle turn, and rising saw Sophy in the half-open doorway, still dressed as he had been astounded to see her on his arrival.

With the inevitable deduction, it was true that she felt satisfied with her present circumstances and her future prospects, but as Acton was perfectly well aware of the nature and extent of that deduction, it appeared necessary to dissemble. She could scarcely endure a remonstrance, yet at the sight of his sunburned yet haggard face her first impulse was to run forward and take it between her hands, smoothing away the wrinkles which made it look so much older to-night. He stood with his back against the mantel-shelf, exactly as she had pictured him, only that he looked unusually limp and tired, a burnt-out pipe in one hand, the other passing lightly over his moustache and chin.

And just as she had foreseen, his lips parted in a smile, though his eyes suggested anything rather than gaiety.

"Well, I suppose I ought to congratulate you," he began.

"Don't you think I deserve it?" she cried, with misleading cheerfulness.

"I suppose everything is quite settled?" he asked.

"Oh yes, quite," she said, and it seemed odd to see the rings on her fingers.

"Then there's no good in saying anything——"

"What should you say?" she demanded.

"Anyhow, I shall content myself with wishing you joy—sounds a little commonplace, doesn't it?"

"My future will not be commonplace at least!" she exclaimed.

"No, I suppose not."

She stood fingering a round diamond ornament at her corsage so that it flashed and caught the light, reminding Acton of the less pretentious brooch which he had bought in the Rue de la Paix. But he did not take it out of his pocket, and though they stood silent this was perhaps the most expressive part of the interview, so that you might have thought they were sharing some common sorrow, as, it may be, they were. Presently she held out her hand.

"Good-night," she murmured, in little above a whisper.

"God bless you, Sophy," he answered, and then she went upstairs, though it was late before Acton retired that night. He found it difficult to resist the belief that Sophy, loving the desirable things which Lord Crawshull could provide, had ended by tolerating the man himself. She appeared delighted also the next day, when Acton explained that as Lady Crawshull she

would have an ample income at her own disposal.

"I think I shall begin by giving every flower-seller in London a grand treat!" she exclaimed. "Doesn't it all seem wonderful?" she added. "Lord Crawshull says the announcement of our engagement will appear in the newspapers to-morrow or the next day."

But before informing the public in general "that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place," Lord Crawshull thought it might be as well to explain matters to Harvey Redford, to whom he sent a letter at his club. At first Harvey consigned his uncle to a distant place and the letter to the waste-paper basket; but a little reflection convinced him that it might be judicious to overlook the scurvy treatment he had received at Lord Crawshull's hands, and in the end he decided (without the slightest suspicion of what lay in store) to go to Grosvenor Square as he had been requested the same afternoon.

Having recently left Sophy at Ivanoff Road after another visit to the jeweller's, Lord Crawshull sat at tea in a small room off the picture-gallery. The smile with which he received Harvey was due less to pleasure at his nephew's presence than to unavoidable

amusement at the development of the situation since their last encounter about a month ago.

"Will you have some tea?" asked Lord Crawshull.

"No, thanks—I got your note," said Harvey.

"Great events from trivial causes spring," remarked his uncle.

"You know," was the answer, "you treated me uncommonly shabbily——"

"Ha!" said Lord Crawshull, staring hard at his cup, "I question whether you won't think I am treating you with equal shabbiness now. I dare say you consider you have a kind of vested right in—in my celibacy."

Although Harvey tried not to start, he felt as if he had received an unexpected electric shock. He had certainly counted on becoming the successor of Lord Crawshull, who perhaps after all was only amusing himself once more at his nephew's expense.

"Oh, well," said Harvey, "it's a free country!"

"If it had not been for your attempted example," continued Lord Crawshull, "I suppose I might not be to-day within three weeks of my own marriage."

"As soon as that?" exclaimed Harvey.

"I hope so——"

"Any one I know?"

"Well, yes," said Lord Crawshull, not entirely without embarrassment; "in fact, Miss Bunce has done me the honour——"

"Sophy—good Lord!" cried Harvey irrepressibly, and for his life he could not help laughing.

"I thought you would prefer to learn the news from—from the fountain-head," said Lord Crawshull, while Harvey began to laugh again. As Sophy had made a fool of himself a few weeks ago, it certainly tended to mitigate his disappointment when he realised that she was now trying the same game on his uncle.

"Anyhow," he answered, "you must let me wish you joy. I hope you'll be most awfully happy, you know."

There was, however, something in Harvey's tone which Lord Crawshull felt inclined to resent:

"Is that intended as a pious suggestion that I shall not be?" he suggested.

"Why," was the answer, "Lady Crawshull is certain to become one of the most popular women in London."

Lord Crawshull rose uneasily from his chair:—"Of course you will put in an appearance at the wedding," he said. "I am trying to

arrange that it shall take place at Torrington. It is not quite decided yet, but Mrs. Chalmers is willing that Sophy shall be married from the Tower House."

He had a pronounced objection to being married in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park, and especially from Acton Marsh's house. On the other hand, he did not wish by a private wedding to suggest that he felt ashamed of his bride. Lord Crawshull was at present far too deeply infatuated to feel in the least ashamed of Sophy, and indeed, having listened to her somewhat painfully candid account of earlier days, he marvelled at the cleverness with which she had adapted herself to fresh surroundings. During the quiet evenings he spent with her at Ivanoff Road, he found Sophy ravishing, none the less because of the little airs and graces she would occasionally assume. It was delightful to observe her young enjoyment of a play or a concert. But when Lord Crawshull compared her with the women of his own circle, he was compelled to go as far as to admit a difference. He tried to persuade himself that this was not radical, that it was even an advantage, for certainly he had never desired to marry within that exalted but limited sphere. Still the difference

remained, and all of Sophy's critics would not be so lenient as himself. Lord Crawshull preferred that his wedding should be the occasion of suitable rejoicings in his own village, and having sounded Mrs. Chalmers as the mother of Sophy's best friend, he found her more than willing to increase her own dignity in the manner he suggested. Nor had Sophy the slightest objection to spend the last few days of her maiden life with Winifred.

"I will come right enough if you let me know the date," said Harvey, on the point of leaving the room. "I have been a bit seedy——"

"You should live a little more carefully," answered his uncle. "Where should I be if I were not a pattern of discretion?"

Harvey's broad grin caused Lord Crawshull to rejoice that he was on the point of departure.

"I'm going to stay with a chap named Davenport of Ours for a week or so," Harvey explained. "The Vicarage, Blythewold-on-Sea will find me until further notice. Good-bye——"

"Good-bye—good-bye," cried Lord Crawshull. "Although," he added, "you would be wiser to run down to Torrington."

CHAPTER XIX

OVERTURES OF PEACE

DRIVEN to the conclusion that Sophy was neither more nor less than an adventuress, Harvey Redford was now able to congratulate himself quite sincerely on being safely out of her clutches. Since Lord Crawshull seemed bent on marriage, it was possible that his offence might bring its own punishment. As far as he was concerned, Harvey admitted that he had been the victim of an unfortunate infatuation, but the recent announcement went a long way towards the completion of his cure. His thoughts turned a little distressfully to Grace Berkeley, whom he had assuredly treated as badly as possible. A few days after his visit to Grosvenor Square, he happened to meet Mrs. Berkeley in Oxford Street, when she explained that Grace also had come to London for a few days' shopping.

"I suppose you have heard the news," said Harvey.

"About Lord Crawshull? oh dear, yes! Taking one fact with another I am sure it's very hard on you; though," Mrs. Berkeley added, "I am not at all certain you don't deserve it."

"Is—is Grace all right?" he asked hastily.

"She is perfectly well——"

"I should immensely like to see her!"

Mrs. Berkeley looked somewhat doubtful. In the face of the announcement of Lord Crawshull's imminent marriage Harvey was no longer a remarkably eligible suitor, but still Mrs. Berkeley remembered that he had an income of eight hundred pounds a year, and this, with Grace's *dot*, would undoubtedly enable them to marry if they wished.

"I really can't venture to guarantee your reception," was the answer. "So you must come entirely at your own risk."

Accordingly, Harvey went to the house the next afternoon—not without serious misgivings. Grace was thankful that she had been prepared for his visit, and, while she felt extremely unforgiving, the news of his jilting (heard a few weeks ago from Winifred) had given her the warmest satisfaction. It seemed deeply humiliating that he should be able, after three years' absence, to treat her as he had done, and

she perceived the trivial strength of a bond which could be broken with such ease. Yet, inconsistently enough, the moment Grace read the announcement of Lord Crawshull's astounding betrothal her feelings underwent something of the nature of a revolution.

She had certainly not loved Harvey a whit the better because he was the presumptive heir. Nevertheless, this fact had seemed a pleasing adjunct, and she understood the force of his present disappointment. If she had been more fortunate and Harvey more constant she knew she should have felt bitterly disappointed herself; as things were, however, Grace repeated again and again that she had no personal interest in the affair.

Warned of his coming, she began to consider the manner of his reception. She could scarcely bring herself to hit a man who was down, though, of course, Harvey might not care whether she forgave him or not, because it was only about a month ago that he had been infatuated by Sophy. It was very well for people to say that young men were liable to that kind of thing, as if they were children and love was a zymotic disease, but the fact remained that he had fallen a very easy prey.

The result was that Grace entered the draw-

ing-room, where Harvey in a chastened mood awaited her, with a tempered severity of demeanour. She did not refuse to shake hands, but she offered only her finger-tips; while she invited him to sit down in a tone which suggested that he might remain standing all the afternoon if he pleased.

"I haven't had an opportunity of congratulating Lord Crawshull yet," she remarked, touching the subject of which her mind was full.

"I have the advantage of you," said Harvey. "A beastly sell, isn't it?" he added.

"Of course, it must be an immense trial for you," answered Grace ambiguously.

"Anyhow, she doesn't care a scrap for him!" cried Harvey.

"There's not the slightest doubt as to whom she cares for," said Grace. "I feel certain Mr. Marsh would have married her long ago if it had been possible."

"Marriage—for her—is simply an investment," muttered Harvey. "She goes to the highest bidder!"

"Still," was the answer, "I believe she would have given herself away——"

"Look here, Grace," Harvey exclaimed, "I don't want to discuss my uncle, or the woman

who is going to be his wife. I want you to say you forgive me before I leave London."

"But I have nothing in the world to forgive!"

"Oh yes," he retorted, "you have a very great deal, and, upon my soul, I don't know what excuse to offer. I can only cry *Peccavi*! Last time we met you carried matters with a high hand, and pretended there had never been anything between us; but you can't have forgotten that day I came to bid you good-bye, and I shall never forget it."

"Of course, there are different ways of remembering!"

"I know I have been a confounded brute——"

"You see," said Grace, "you asked me to wait for you, and—well, I waited. But when you came, it was to tell me, like the Irishman, that you couldn't come."

"Yes," answered Harvey, "I know. When I might have offered something worth accepting, I stayed away, and now I have not much to bless myself with—here I am."

"Well," said Grace, "I am glad you came to—to say good-bye."

"I can put Davenport off," he cried, "if you only give me half a hint."

But Grace shook her head: "I hate giving hints," she retorted, "and, honestly, it isn't a question exactly of forgiveness; while you have me at a disadvantage, because you know that I—that I waited."

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"Why, it's very much as you said just now. I question whether you can offer me anything worth accepting."

"I—I didn't think you cared so much about the title 'as all that, Grace," he exclaimed, and her face turned crimson in her wrath.

"I used to care about it a great deal," she admitted. "I don't pretend to be above that kind of thing; but I was thinking of something different."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Only that I understood you to offer your—your love——"

"God knows it's yours, Grace!"

"Ah, but after the teaching of experience, I question whether it is worth having," she answered, with a sigh.

Scarcely knowing what to say, Harvey eventually left the house, perhaps even more despondent than when he had been cast adrift by Sophy, to whom his present indifference was perhaps shown by the fact that he contem-

plated a visit to Ivanoff Road. He had avoided Marsh for more than a month, and their last encounters had not been of a particularly cordial character. Postponing his journey to Ivanoff Road yet a few days, Harvey took a cab to Regent's Park the night before he had arranged to set forth to Blythewold.

"Mr. Marsh?" he asked, when Mary opened the door at nine o'clock, and, hat in hand, he followed her to the drawing-room.

"Captain Redford," said the housemaid; and Harvey found himself in the presence of Sophy and Lord Crawshull, who both looked extremely surprised to see him. Lord Crawshull, indeed, looked so indignant that Sophy could not avoid the thought that her future husband disguised a somewhat awkward temper behind his usual suavity.

"The fact is," stammered Harvey, as she charmingly offered her hand, "I came to say good-bye to Marsh before I leave London for a week or two; though," he added, "I am glad to have an opportunity of congratulating you."

Sophy broke into a merry laugh, while Lord Crawshull deplored her familiar demeanour:

"Why, you will be my nephew," she cried. "Will he have to call me aunt?" she asked, turning to her fiancé.

"I dare say Harvey will find Mr. Marsh in his smoking-room," was the stiff answer.

"Suppose I show you the way," explained Sophy, stepping towards the door.

"Allow me to ring for the servant," suggested Lord Crawshull.

"Oh, very well," said Sophy; and Mary was told to take Captain Redford to Acton's den.

Harvey, quite unnecessarily in Lord Crawshull's opinion, offered his hand again :

"The next time we meet will probably be at your wedding," he remarked.

"And I intend Miss Berkeley to be there," she said.

"Harvey, you are keeping Mary waiting," Lord Crawshull snapped out; and he came to the conclusion that there were one or two little ways in which Sophy would require to be trained—after her marriage. She was too unrestrained to everybody but himself; a judicious superciliousness must be cultivated, although it might be indiscreet to venture upon the slightest criticism at present. Lord Crawshull, indeed, was passing through Purgatory on his way to Paradise. While every day seemed wasted unless he saw Sophy, he detested Ivanoff Road. He liked to face her at dinner, but he

suffered from Mrs. Wormauld's fare. It was difficult to go to the house without meeting its owner, although he felt quite willing to consign Acton Marsh to limbo. Used to command, he had become a humble suppliant at Sophy's feet ; he reproached himself for playing the part of a love-sick boy, and perceived that the only remedy was an early marriage.

On entering the smoking-room Harvey met with a cordial reception, Acton being perfectly willing to ignore the short interregnum during which he had regarded Redford with antagonistic feelings. He invited Harvey to sit down, offered cigars, and listened patiently to an account of the intrusion upon Lord Crawshull and Sophy in the drawing-room.

"I am going away to-morrow for a few weeks," said Harvey. "Thought I would just look you up beforehand."

"Where are you off to?" asked Acton, leaning back in his chair.

"To Blythewold-on-Sea," answered Harvey; and observing a peculiar change in Marsh's face, he added, "Do you know the place?"

"I have never been there—never likely to go." Acton puffed silently at his pipe once or twice. "My—my wife lives at Blythewold, you know," he explained.

"If I knew, I had forgotten," said Harvey.
"What is the Johnny's name?"

"Dr. Renshaw—he is her uncle. A capital man; I feel that I owe him and Mrs. Renshaw a debt I can never repay."

"Still you do pay them!"

Acton passed a hand wearily over his face. He had fallen a prey to low spirits during the last week or so, and almost longed to see Sophy's wedding an accomplished fact, since it appeared to be inevitable. Evening after evening he spent alone with his oppressive and tantalising reflections; for although he had resolutely set his face towards the light, it was impossible to refrain from backward glances.

"Yes, I pay the Renshaws as far as money goes," Acton answered. "He generally looks me up once or twice a year, though I never know what to say to the man. Still, from the day Major Ford first took his daughter to Blytheswold, Renshaw has seen to it that I haven't been troubled by her."

Harvey did not suggest that Lord Crawshull should share his hansom that night, and, in fact, he outstayed his uncle by an hour. But although it was midnight when Harvey bade Acton good-bye, Sophy had not gone to bed. Mary had bolted the door, Mrs. Wormauld had gone

upstairs, leaving Acton according to custom to switch off the light in the hall. But before he had begun to think of doing this, Sophy entered the smoking-room, and he rose with an apology for its atmosphere.

"You know that I don't mind," she said, taking the nearest chair. "Quite like the old days, isn't it?" she added, with a glance into his face.

"Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!"

"Lord Crawshull has been talking about the wedding," she continued. "I thought I ought to warn you that we are to receive a kind of official visit from Mrs. Chalmers the day after to-morrow. Lord Crawshull is rather keen on being married at Torrington."

"I have told him the decision must rest with you," said Acton.

"You don't particularly wish me to be married from here?" she suggested.

He smiled a little ruefully.

"Not particularly," he murmured.

"Of course," she cried, "one must be married somewhere."

"So that the locality scarcely matters—is that it?"

"I like the idea of Torrington," she admitted. "There would be all manner of rejoicings and

excitement. Then I should spend the last few days with Winifred ; I should like that too."

"Better than spending them here?"

"Ye—es," she said, and for a few moments you might have heard a pin drop. "You would have to come down to give me away!" she added abruptly.

"Is that quite indispensable?"

"Quite," she insisted. "Because no one else has the least claim to me, and how can you give away what isn't your own?"

"I suppose you don't know that I'm a kind of miser," said Acton ; "Elwes wasn't in it with me."

"Oh, I know what you are," she answered. "Nobody has such excellent cause to know. You need only leave home the day before," she continued, "and I think you ought to see Mrs. Chalmers when she comes."

"Very well," he rejoined ; "and in the meantime I must speak to Mrs. Wormauld about your trousseau. She will see that everything is arranged worthy of—of the future Lady Crawshull, you know."

As Sophy rose and came to his side the diamond star on her neck rose and fell with her rapid breathing.

"I am not worth much—really," she said.

“Aren't you?”

“You think I am, because you—because you like me. But sometimes,” she continued, “I almost wish you knew more about me, for then you wouldn't mind so much.”

“Kismet, Sophy,” he muttered. “So we have arrived at something to-night,” he added, in a more cheerful tone. “It is decided that the wedding is to take place amidst universal acclamation at Torrington.”

“And that you are to give me away!”

“Only too thankful,” he answered.

CHAPTER XX

AT TORRINGTON

MRS. CHALMERS, a short, stout, good-natured woman, with elaborately-dressed fair hair, eager to improve her position in the county, looked extremely gratified when Sophy accepted her invitation, although she somewhat exceeded Lord Crawshull's instructions when she hospitably bothered Acton Marsh to accompany his protégée to the Tower House. He insisted, however, that his arrangements were as yet incomplete, and that, in any case, Mrs. Berkeley had the first claim upon him.

With the departure of Mrs. Chalmers began a period of intense excitement. Although Mrs. Wormauld regretted that she had not received an invitation to Torrington, she thoroughly enjoyed the superintendence of Sophy's trousseau, whilst assuredly Acton had never signed cheques with more reluctance in his life.

Lord Crawshull having to entertain a house-

full of guests was compelled to precede Sophy, but it was arranged before he left London that the honeymoon should be spent in various European cities. The wedding was to take place on Thursday, Sophy leaving London the previous Saturday, accompanied by a maid, whom Mrs. Wormauld undertook to engage. But even then Lord Crawshull appeared unwilling that she should travel with such a small escort to Torrington, and Mrs. Wormauld began to hope that this might prove her opportunity, until Acton suggested that Winifred Chalmers should be invited to Ivanoff Road for a few days, and then accompany Sophy on her journey.

"I thought it would be rather—rather nice to have the last week alone," Sophy expostulated.

"Still, you seemed to like Miss Chalmers!"

"Yes, of course," she said. "But I shall see her later on, and I—I shan't see you, you know."

Acton, however, entertained a kind of dread of those last days which Sophy was to pass beneath his roof; the air seemed already to be highly charged with emotion, and he insisted that Winifred's invitation should be sent.

"I hoped you would take me somewhere on Friday evening," Sophy suggested.

"I have an engagement at the club," he answered ; 'and so with a sigh she promised to write to Winifred, who reached Ivanoff Road on Wednesday, the morning of Lord Crawshull's departure.

The few remaining days were fully occupied ; the mornings being given up to shopping, the afternoons to concerts, the evenings to the theatre. Business, as Acton vaguely described it, seemed to keep him constantly away from home, and so the days sped and Friday dawned, the last complete twenty-four hours which Sophy was to spend beneath his roof.

Acton had never seen her so excited as she had become since Winifred's arrival. He often perplexed himself when she went about the house apparently quite light-hearted, wondering sometimes whether she lacked the power to feel deeply ; whether she was at heart contented with her chosen lot.

It is certain that she felt more than contented with her purchases day by day, with the presents with which Lord Crawshull loaded her, and that she constantly looked forward to her approaching dignities. After to-morrow she would become the chief object of interest at Torrington ; she would be presented to Lord Crawshull's aristocratic friends ! She knew

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why Acton had lately adopted such a freezing manner, and why he spent so much time (to the neglect of his work) away from home. She understood that he felt more than a little afraid of himself during these last quickly passing hours.

And Sophy often reflected upon the marvellous circumstances of her rise in life. Less than three years and a half ago, she had been glad to receive hints from Mrs. Fripp concerning the proper management of her knife and fork—now she was on the eve of becoming the Countess of Crawshull. Nor did she entertain the slightest doubt that she should acquit herself well in that capacity. Active as her imagination might be, she was incapable of conceiving such a standard as that by which Lord Crawshull's guests would test her. She had satisfied him, and Captain Redford, and even Acton Marsh; how could she fail to please the rest? She lived through those last unmarried days in a whirl of excitement, but still she could not avoid the quiet night hours in her own room. Even then she did not dream of going back, although she was still capable of thinking that she could have gone back if she pleased; it was not and would not be until Thursday, actually too late, only

she preferred to go forward. Nevertheless, after Winifred's arrival there was not a night on which Sophy failed to cry herself to sleep; and now Friday had come there were sudden moments when she felt almost appalled at the notion that Acton was about to pass out of her life. He had taken care to see very little of her that day, and when she returned from the dressmaker's at five o'clock he had already gone out for the evening.

For once Sophy set forth to the theatre regretfully, and she would have found it difficult to give a comprehensible account of the play.

"Has Mr. Marsh come home yet?" she asked, staying behind in the hall to speak to Mary on her return at half-past eleven.

But he had not come home; and while she and Winifred were regaling themselves with soup in the drawing-room, Mrs. Wormauld suggested that, having to leave directly after breakfast the next morning, they ought not to sit up late talking to-night, as they usually insisted on doing. So Sophy kissed Winifred and went to her own room, where she took off her dress and substituted a tea-gown than which, she knew, she possessed no garment more becoming. Removing all her jewellery

(she had perhaps an inclination to display a little too much) save her rings and a wide gold chain about her neck, she sat down to wait until she heard Acton enter the house. A long time she sat there with throbbing pulses before the street door opened; then her heart seemed to leap as she rose and stepped out on to the landing. She had made up her mind to speak to him before she slept to-night, to thank him for his liberality over the trousseau—and for other things as well.

Looking down between the balusters she saw his head and shoulders as he crossed the hall, she caught a glimpse of his face, and then her purpose suddenly changed. Stealing back to her room she closed the door, undressed, and went to bed, while she could hear him lock up the studio before mounting the staircase. The next morning the whole household was early astir, and during breakfast Acton talked almost incessantly to Winifred Chalmers; but when he rose, Sophy deliberately followed him to the studio.

"You have tried to send me away without thanking you," she said, closing the door.

"Sophy," he answered, "if you really wish to do me a good turn, for heaven's sake don't say another word about it."

She hesitated a moment, then impulsively rested a hand on his shoulder.

"You know that I do feel grateful to you," she urged.

"Why—yes, of course."

"You refuse to let me say a word," she cried, "and yet this morning seems like the end of life."

"The beginning of another," he suggested.

"Ah—but you will have no part in it!" she said; and Acton was struck by the anguish in her voice.

"Just tell me," he muttered; "you are making the change willingly?"

"Yes—oh yes, I suppose so. Yes, I am," she answered, and there was something like defiance in her tone.

"You don't feel the remotest wish to—to back out?"

"N—no," she said.

"Anyhow, it would be a little late in the day," he suggested, forcing a laugh. "And what a crowd of women will envy your lot! Rings on your fingers——"

"Yes, and I like wearing them," she retorted, "only I—I could have done without them. You know that, don't you? You know that I could?"

"Well, there's no necessity, anyhow," said Acton, "and you must recollect that trains won't wait."

"But is this to be really our—our real good-bye?" she asked, staring blankly up into his face.

"I shall see you on Thursday. We shall have a carriage to ourselves to the church——"

A curious idea flashed across his mind—to the metre of "Young Lochinvar."

"But then we shan't be able to talk properly," she insisted. "And I have lived here all this time, and you have done everything for me and had nothing in return——"

"Oh yes, I have, Sophy."

"And now," she continued, "you expect me just to shake hands and say good-morning, and—and to pass out of your life."

"You'll never do that," said Acton. "But you're wasting valuable minutes——"

"It isn't waste!"

"Ah yes, dear, it is," he murmured. "Now, you must cut away, or you will bother Mrs. Wormauld out of her senses."

She went away, the railway omnibus came to the gate, and Acton heard the men carrying her new trunks down to the hall. He stood gazing out at the back garden, noticing that

the grass required cutting, and reminding himself to order the gardener. He heard plenteous talking, with Mrs. Wormauld's voice raised above the others ; she was to see Sophy and Winifred off at the station, where Dawson, the new maid, was to join them.

Presently the studio door was opened, and the two girls entered together, Winifred in advance with her right hand outstretched.

"I wish," she said, "I could persuade you to come to stay with us on Monday."

"It's immensely kind of you, but——"

"But you won't come?"

"Afraid I mustn't."

"Thank you very much for having me," said Winifred, and Acton looked at his watch.

"There are not many minutes to spare," he suggested.

"Tell Mrs. Wormauld I am just coming," cried Sophy ; and following the hint, not without her own private thoughts on the subject, Winifred left the studio, whereupon, taking Acton completely by surprise, Sophy uncereemoniously flung her arms round his neck. She rested her cheek against his own so that he felt her tears, she kissed his lips, and then, provoked beyond resistance, he folded his arms

tightly about her body. For a second she clung to him, then, suddenly unlocking her fingers, she turned and quitted the room without a word. He heard her voice the next moment in the hall.

"Come, Mrs. Wormauld ; come, Winifred ! You will make me late for the train. Good-bye, Mary," Acton heard her say ; but he refrained from going into the hall to see the last of her, standing with his hands in his pockets, dim-eyed, until the omnibus was driven away. Then he took his brushes, prepared his palette, and began to paint, only to daub the canvas over later in the day.

The omnibus was not long in reaching the terminus, where there remained only sufficient time to meet Dawson and to go to the compartment which Lord Crawshull had insisted on reserving. Sophy bade Mrs. Wormauld good-bye, and as the door was banged and the train began to move she felt that her new epoch had now actually begun. The two hours' journey accomplished, she found Lord Crawshull awaiting her at Torrington Station with a motor car and a cart for the luggage. On the drive to the Tower House he pointed out the roof of Torrington Place amidst the trees in the park, and Sophy naturally felt curious

to approach more closely the house which was shortly to become her own home.

Lord Crawshull explained that Mrs. Chalmers had promised to bring her to dine there this evening, when with the house-party and one or two other guests the number would be about twenty. On reaching the Tower House she received a cordial welcome from every member of the family, and felt that she was pleasantly regarded as a visitor of distinction. Sophy had never stayed in such a large house before, while yet she rejoiced to find everything as informal and comfortable as at No. 10 Ivanoff Road. She was conducted by Mrs. Chalmers in person to the principal guest-chamber, and on coming downstairs a little later nothing was talked about but the wedding, and all the accompanying festivities. There were to be four bridesmaids, Winifred being the chief, and the others relatives of Lord Crawshull, besides two small pages. Triumphal arches were to be erected between Torrington Place and the church, while the ceremony was to be performed by the Bishop of Bonchester.

Mrs. Chalmers during the afternoon spoke confidentially to Sophy concerning her dress for the dinner-party that evening, and agreed that nothing could be better than the new white

silk frock, with a long train which Sophy did not know how she should manage.

Lord Crawshull came to the hall to meet her, and then with a hand on his arm Sophy simultaneously entered the large, brilliantly illumined drawing-room, and that exclusive society in which she did not doubt she was henceforth to become a leader. She at once became the centre of a circle of distinguished men and handsome and extremely critical women. It was difficult to realise that she was actually wide-awake, difficult also to keep a cool head on her shoulders and fill her part as admirably as she intended.

For that matter, Sophy remained blissfully ignorant of her own shortcomings. At Ivanoff Road she had long ago become perfectly at her ease, but the atmosphere of Torrington Place seemed foreign and a little overwhelming. She felt almost as anxious concerning her behaviour as that night (such a long time ago!) when she had dined at the restaurant with Acton Marsh. But her present companions were more exacting than Acton had ever been, although their compliments confirmed Sophy's opinion that she was acquitting herself well. At times, however, she remained rather markedly silent, and then in her excite-

ment she would become a little more unrestrained than Lord Crawshull entirely approved, as when after dinner, and just as the men re-entered the drawing-room, she almost ran across the floor for the express purpose of speaking to Grace Berkeley.

"Captain Redford has not come yet?" she inquired.

"I believe he is staying with some friends at Blythewold," answered Grace, blushing at the suggestion that she could be especially interested in Harvey's movements. Nevertheless, she found it impossible to refrain from admiration of Sophy; and, indeed, while she had cause for animosity towards the future Lady Crawshull, to-night Grace felt disposed to regard her more in sorrow than in anger. Her profound dislike for Captain Redford's uncle was by no means mitigated by the prospect of his marriage, and the consequent ruin of Harvey's prospects and perhaps of her own. Grace was not yet quite certain how far her own interests might be concerned.

On Sunday morning Sophy accompanied Lord Crawshull to the village church and found it impossible to pay much attention to the service with so many eyes upon her; in the afternoon Lord Crawshull fetched her again,

taking her for a ramble about the park and pointing out the best views of Torrington Place.

"To-morrow morning," he said, "you must ask Winifred to bring you to explore the interior. I think you will find one or two things to interest you."

"Oh," cried Sophy, "it is all delightful!"

"At any rate, you will make it so," he answered. "At my age a man cannot afford to shorten his days, but I confess I should like to blot out Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday."

"If you could," she said, with a laugh, "I should probably not have a wedding-dress."

"Didn't you bring it with you?"

"It is to arrive on Wednesday morning," she explained; "I think it will look lovely."

"I am certain of that," said Lord Crawshull fatuously; and then meeting some of the house-party, he felt compelled to leave her side.

The following morning men began the erection of the triumphal arches, while others set about the building of a shed in which every man, woman and child in Torrington was to partake of a supplementary wedding-feast. The well-filled days sped; Monday and Tues-

day passed, and, awakening on Wednesday morning, rather late, for there had been a ball at Torrington Place the previous night, Sophy realised that the last day of her maiden life had begun.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST DAY

LORD CRAWSHULL had been annoyed on Tuesday afternoon by the receipt of a telegram from Harvey Redford postponing his arrival until the next day, when he intended to travel from London by the train due at half-past three. On Wednesday afternoon the smaller motor car was sent to meet him at Torrington station, having to pass beneath four green triumphal arches on the way. Each had its own unoriginal motto: "Welcome to the bride," "God bless you both," and so forth, and indeed the village already wore an air of festivity. Many of the cottages displayed Royal Standards and Union Jacks in their front gardens, the school was decorated with evergreens and flowers, and the chauffeur (a converted second coachman) received a good deal of badinage as he drove through the village. At the station stood piles of boxes full of contributions towards to-morrow's festivities, but it happened

that Harvey was the only passenger to alight.

"Drop me at Mrs. Berkeley's," he said, as he took his seat in the motor car, and, a few minutes later, he sprang out at the gate. "You needn't wait," he added, and the car at once panted on.

Grace, having just come in from the garden, was in the act of hanging up her straw hat in the hall, when she heard the motor car stop, and, going to the threshold, saw Harvey, who had certainly lost no time in coming to her on the present occasion.

"I want to speak to Marsh!" he exclaimed, retaining her hand, and she perceived that he laboured under some unusual excitement.

"Then you should have gone to Ivanoff Road," she answered.

"Isn't he here?" said Harvey. "I understood he was coming to give away the bride——"

"Why, so he is," she explained; "but he was shabby enough to put off his journey until to-morrow morning."

"I wish to goodness I had known," cried Harvey, as he followed Grace into the drawing-room. "You see," he continued, "I only got at the truth yesterday; that's why I couldn't

come to the ball last night. Of course, Marsh ought to be told at once."

"To be told what?" demanded Grace.

"About his wife—she used to live at Blythewold, you understand."

"Did you see Mrs. Marsh?"

"Not much," said Harvey; and Grace, becoming as excited as himself, leaned forward and rested a hand on his sleeve.

"You don't—you don't mean that she's dead, Harvey!"

"Five years or more ago," he answered solemnly.

"Yet Mr. Marsh has not been told!"

"I have been staying with the vicar," Harvey explained, "and, of course, he knows pretty well everybody in the town. I didn't like to mention Marsh's name, but I felt a bit curious to see his wife again, so I kept my eyes open every time I passed Renshaw's house. There's a plate on the door: Dr. Renshaw, physician and surgeon—though he doesn't seem to have half-a-dozen patients; lives on the money he gets from Marsh, you see."

"But how shameful!"

"Two nights ago," Harvey continued, "I heard that one or two people were coming to

dine—a sort of parochial reception, you know—and not one the vicar enjoyed over much. Renshaw and his wife were amongst them—a dry old stick, and during the evening I went to his side and remarked that I knew Acton Marsh—quite innocently, you understand. You should have seen the chap's face! It turned suddenly grey—as if he were dead. He couldn't get out a word for a second or two, then he wetted his lips, tried to look me in the face, and said Mrs. Marsh had lived with him for some years and that she was perfectly well."

"What a dreadful man!" murmured Grace.

"I began to smell a rat," said Harvey. "Of course, I hadn't any definite suspicion, still I couldn't help feeling there was something queer. I thought I'd make up to the old woman. Upon my word," he cried, with a laugh, "I ought to qualify for the Intelligence Department. I led her on by easy stages, and while she was agreeing with me that the climate of Blythewold was as bracing as they make 'em, I suddenly sprang my surprise: 'I know Acton Marsh very well,' I said, and, upon my word, I thought the old woman would have a fit. But by this time I felt more and more certain there must be something wrong, so I

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got up and said I thought of paying Mrs. Marsh a visit the following day."

"Did you?" asked Grace.

"I thought the time had come to consult the vicar. The matter seemed as plain as A B C; things always do when you know all about them. He remembered that there used to be a resident patient at Renshaw's, but that was more than five years ago. She had been ill, so they took her away for change of air and returned without her. Renshaw told Mr. Davenport that she suffered from phthisis."

"But are you perfectly certain about her death?" cried Grace.

"Absolutely," said Harvey. "I was hot on the job by that time. I ought to have left Blytheswold by an early train yesterday morning, so as to arrive for the dance last night; but I determined to sacrifice three or four waltzes with you, sent a wire, and at about half-past eleven I went to Renshaw's house. I was told that the doctor was out, and that Mrs. Renshaw couldn't be seen, but as the slavey had left me on the mat while she went to a room on the right of the hall, I guessed the precious couple were in there, pushed open the door, and there they sat staring at each other like a pair of fools. I soon let them hear

I knew all about it, and that if they didn't own up I should go direct to the police station. You never saw a man in such a funk. The woman was better, but even she hadn't much fight in her. Before I left the house Renshaw confessed that Mrs. Marsh had died more than five years ago and been buried at Torquay. He admitted that he had kept the fact dark, and continued to receive five hundred a year from Acton just as if she had lived. He gave me the certificate of Mrs. Marsh's burial, and I've got it in my pocket. If I hadn't understood that I should find Marsh here, I should have gone to Ivanoff Road on my way through London. Of course, he ought to be told at once."

"Do you—do you think it would make any difference?" asked Grace.

"Difference!"

"To Lord Crawshull's marriage?" she cried, with a heightening colour.

"Good Lord, you don't imagine——"

"I know that Mr. Marsh and Sophy were immensely fond of each other," she insisted.

"No man in the world," said Harvey, "could dream of upsetting things at the eleventh hour."

"Perhaps not," answered Grace; "but some women might."

Harvey shook his head.

"What time do you expect Marsh to-morrow morning?" he asked.

"At half-past eleven. We have arranged luncheon at twelve."

"You may as well invite me!"

"Of course," she answered; "we shall be very pleased."

"And you are going to exercise the prerogative of mercy?" he pleaded, drawing a little nearer.

"Lord Crawshull will be wondering what has happened to you," suggested Grace.

"How is he?" asked Harvey perfunctorily.

"Oh, he makes himself perfectly ridiculous. He seems completely infatuated. Absurd in a man of his age."

"And Sophy—how is she getting along?"

"Naturally, she has a few things to learn," said Grace. "After all, Torrington Place is not quite the same as Ivanoff Road. She can scarcely have been at a dinner-party until that rather trying ordeal on Saturday evening."

"Still, she got through it!"

"Ye—es, she got through it," was the answer. "But she is a beautiful girl!" Grace exclaimed the next instant. "Wonderful, too, when one remembers her antecedents."

"Well," cried Harvey, "at half-past eleven to-morrow, if I don't get a chance of seeing you before. Then we can go to the church together."

Leaving Mrs. Berkeley's house he lost no time in walking to Torrington Place, where Lord Crawshull stood at the entrance with the head coachman, to whom he was issuing final instructions about the carriages for the following day.

"So you couldn't control your impatience for half-an-hour!" cried Lord Crawshull, as Harvey offered his hand. "Been making things up with Grace Berkeley?" he added, more genially than usual.

"I thought I should find Acton Marsh there," answered Harvey; "I had something to tell the fellow."

"Anything important?"

"I have been playing the amateur detective," said Harvey. "Anyhow, I discovered that Marsh's wife died five years ago."

"Naturally, he would be impatient to hear such news?"

"Now, in your present circumstances," Harvey retorted, "the sentiment sounds a little incongruous."

"Come in," Lord Crawshull exclaimed, and

he led the way to the smaller library. "Sit down," he said; and when Harvey had taken a chair, he added, "So Marsh's wife is dead! Did you tell the Berkeleys?"

"There was no need to make a mystery of the affair any longer, you know."

"Then you did tell them?"

"I told Grace," said Harvey. "Of course, if I hadn't made certain Marsh would be here, I should have gone to Ivanoff Road."

"As it is," Lord Crawshull snapped out, "you won't see him until—until after the ceremony!"

"I have arranged to meet him at half-past eleven."

Lord Crawshull was silent for a few seconds. He scarcely cared to hint at the thoughts which nevertheless persisted in obtruding themselves. More eager every hour that passed to consummate his happiness, he tried to persuade himself that his incipient fears were unworthy alike of himself, of Acton Marsh, and of Sophy. It seemed unthinkable that any belated circumstance could arise to dash the cup from his lips. Still, he was becoming the prey to uneasiness, whilst his jealousy of Acton grew more and more active. Sophy had not minced matters that day she promised to become Lady

Crawshull; she had frankly admitted her regard for Marsh, and Lord Crawshull had consoled himself by the reflection that possession would be nine points of the law.

Sophy, however, was not his own property yet! If she had a drawback—though, in truth, the characteristic often seemed to add to her piquancy—it was her disregard for ordinary convention. Lord Crawshull recognised in a manner that she was a law unto herself, and he entertained doubts as to the manner in which she might conceivably attempt to carry out her own enactments.

But the extensive preparations for to-morrow appeared to ensure his own gratification. The finishing touches were already being put to the triumphal arches; the tables and forms were placed in the improvised shed in readiness for the villagers' feast. The Bishop of Bonchester was expected at Torrington Place in time for dinner to-night, and the carriage had been ordered to convey Lord and Lady Crawshull to the station after the wedding to-morrow.

"You understand," said Lord Crawshull grudgingly, "that I naturally deprecate any disturbance of my wife's mind on her wedding-day."

"Naturally," answered Harvey; and he could not entirely suppress a smile.

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded his uncle.

"Well, that depends on Marsh," said Harvey.

"Almost a pity to disturb even his tranquillity until—until afterwards!"

"Think it would make any difference?" asked Harvey, repeating the question which Grace had asked a little earlier.

"Marsh," continued Lord Crawshull, "will no doubt feel excited at the news. He may be ill-advised enough to blurt it out on his way to church. Natural sympathy with a man to whom Sophy is under some obligation——"

"Yes—some," said Harvey.

"You don't imagine that Grace will be chattering——"

"The least likely thing in the world," cried Harvey. "The two girls scarcely know each other."

"Ask Young to take you to your room," said Lord Crawshull; and a few minutes later Harvey was on his way upstairs, where his bags had already preceded him. Lighting a cigarette, he stood gazing out at the window which overlooked the park, and now it became impossible not to wonder whether after all he stood a chance of one day becoming its owner.

If, as Grace insisted and Lord Crawshull appeared to fear, Acton loved Sophy, it must certainly be peculiarly tantalising to learn that from first to last there had existed no impediment to their marriage. Whilst Harvey would not take a step to bring about the interruption of the wedding, he had no overweening regard for his uncle ; and if a kindly fate were to decree Lord Crawshull's perpetual celibacy, it would be a subject for unfeigned rejoicing. He laughed aloud as he tried to imagine Lord Crawshull's present sensations.

"Good Lord!" he murmured, "fancy being engaged to a woman whom you believed capable of running off with another chap on the eve of her wedding."

His own knowledge of the woman in question prevented him, however, from counting on the succession. Even if she loved Acton as much as Grace asserted, Harvey believed she loved money more. He could not forget her peculiarly callous treatment of himself, and yet remembering her charms, perhaps a little more distinctly than Grace would have wished, he was fain to admit that Sophy would make a delightful wife if she honestly cared for her husband. At least she could not feel the slightest regard for Crawshull, and, indeed,

Harvey doubted whether she was capable of any emotion worthy the name of love. Gratitude towards Acton Marsh even she might not unnaturally experience, but such a feeling would scarcely weigh in the balance against Torrington Place and the fine estate upon which Harvey stood at the moment gazing. His reflections were interrupted by a tap at his bedroom door.

"Come in!" he cried, turning to throw his cigarette end into the fireplace.

"His Lordship wishes to speak to you, Captain," said a footman.

"Where is Lord Crawshull?"

"In the small library," was the answer; and going downstairs, Harvey found his uncle seated just as he had left him.

"Sorry to disturb you, Harvey," said Lord Crawshull, more graciously than usual, "but I have been thinking about what you were telling me. I wish to-morrow to pass without a blemish. They say old fools are the worst of fools, but, upon my soul, I should hate my wife to have any drawback——"

"Why, of course," answered Harvey, inclined for the moment to feel almost sympathetic.

"As to the precise hour that Marsh is told about his wife's death, that we can discuss later

on. For the present, I should like you to go to Mrs. Berkeley's——"

"With all the pleasure in the world!" cried Harvey promptly.

"And just to give Grace a hint—I dare say it is quite unnecessary—but just to give her a hint in case she should meet Sophy, not to upset her mind, you understand."

Harvey understood perfectly; he understood more than his uncle desired, but, in a manner, Lord Crawshull was becoming a little reckless. If he could only get to-morrow safely over and call Sophy his wife he did not care, but the more he considered Harvey's untoward discovery, together with the peculiarities of Sophy's character, the more alarming grew his fears.

His own sincerity was too brutal to allow him to mince matters. He had purchased his wife, only, unfortunately, the transaction had not been completed. Although she had been a perfectly willing negotiator, she had entered into the bargain in ignorance of a fact which might have had an important bearing on her conduct. Up to a certain point he placed the most implicit confidence in Sophy, and if once she became his wife he hoped he should never rue the day. But Lord Crawshull could not

forget her treatment of Harvey. Even in that case he was shrewd enough to give her credit for the motive she had alleged. He believed that she had sincerely pitied Grace Berkeley, and that Harvey being of no particular account she had flung him aside. The fact, however, remained, that she had not for a moment troubled to study Harvey's feelings ; these had apparently not entered into her calculations, and on this afternoon before his wedding, Lord Crawshull could not refrain from asking himself whether she would study his own.

For, if she pitied Grace, how much more deeply would she sympathise with that confounded Acton Marsh, to say nothing of the possible complication of her personal wishes. Lord Crawshull believed that he could succeed in persuading Harvey to lunch at Torrington Place to-morrow, and thus to avoid Acton until after the ceremony, and in the meantime he had removed all fear of an untimely disclosure from Grace Berkeley. He regarded women as less scrupulous than men in such matters, whereas he perceived that Grace might possibly have a selfish end to serve. The necessity for such precautions did not make him a whit less eager to make Sophy his wife. While he reviled himself as a fool, she ap-

peared more desirable with every hour that passed. Lord Crawshull's chief purpose to-day was to make absolutely certain that nothing should prevent Sophy from becoming his wife to-morrow.

CHAPTER XXII

A RECONCILIATION

MISS GRACE BERKELEY, like most other women, was a compound of good and not so good. Unwelcome ideas sometimes entered her head, and after Harvey's departure this afternoon, she became a prey to thoughts which she would sooner had not disturbed her peace.

Without much bias in Sophy's favour she had sufficient sympathy and imagination to make some allowances for conduct which yet seemed to need considerable excuse. In a sense she even told herself that Sophy had displayed a kind of heroism, although in behaving differently towards one who was placed peculiarly in his power, Acton Marsh would have shown a baseness in which there could have been nothing romantic.

Grace perceived that for a young woman born and bred as she herself had been, for instance, the hour was far too late for rebellion.

Almost as well to dream of revolt immediately after the ceremony as such a short time before it. But Sophy was made of different stuff, and any way, it seemed only fair that her decisive step should be taken with complete knowledge. For her own part, leaving aside every other consideration, Grace knew she should lack the courage to revolt, and she even doubted whether she possessed the hardihood to approach the Tower House to ask for Sophy, and tell her about Harvey's discovery—all in a casual manner, as if it were a piece of the most ordinary news. Before Grace made up her mind, upbraiding conscience well-nigh turned the scale. The effect of the announcement must depend on Sophy's character, and on the relative strength of her love for Acton Marsh and the great things of this world. But Grace was compelled to admit that she might not have dreamed of going to the Tower House this afternoon if her own feelings towards Harvey Redford had not tended towards forgiveness. If she had positively determined not to marry Harvey, she could scarcely persuade herself that she would have gone to Mrs. Chalmers' on Sophy's score alone. She told herself, indeed, that she was acting from a combination of motives, and

having stuck two pins rather fiercely into her hat, she was ready to set forth.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Berkeley, meeting her in the hall.

"Oh, I am just going to stroll over to the Tower House to speak to Agnes Chalmers," was the answer; and if Harvey had not taken the short cut through the Home Wood and across the meadow, Grace would undoubtedly have met him on her way. As it happened, he entered Mrs. Berkeley's drawing-room a few minutes after her daughter's departure, and was at once unsuspectingly told of Grace's destination.

"Good heavens!" cried Harvey, gazing at his hostess in obvious astonishment.

"Is that particularly surprising?" demanded Mrs. Berkeley. "Grace and the Chalmers girls seldom pass a day without meeting once or twice."

"Weren't you surprised to hear about Marsh?" asked Harvey.

"Isn't he coming to-morrow after all?" she exclaimed.

"About his wife——"

"I have heard nothing about his wife," said Mrs. Berkeley, shaking her head in bewilderment. In as few words as possible Harvey repeated the story:

"You see," he added, "Lord Crawshull had the notion that Sophy would be rather upset, and he asked me to give Grace a hint not to tell her."

"I sincerely trust Grace will not be foolish enough to make mischief!"

"You—you think it might, then?"

"My dear Harvey," was the answer, "you know the adage: 'What's bred in the bone!' If it were a girl of our own class one would know better where one stood. But long ago I warned Mr. Marsh to send Sophy Bunce away——"

"Oh, but surely!" cried Harvey, "she could never play the jilt at the latest moment."

"I don't know what she might be capable of doing! An ordinarily brought-up girl would have the influence of custom to restrain her; this young woman has nothing of the kind. I confess I don't envy Lord Crawshull's feelings since he condescended to send a warning to Grace."

"In order that Sophy's mind should not be upset!"

"You mustn't try to make me believe you are quite so ingenuous," was the answer. And, becoming a little more firmly convinced of the possibility of a rebellion, Harvey broke into

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a rather boyish laugh. "Ah!" said Mrs. Berkeley, "that is very significant."

"Of what?"

"The treatment Lord Crawshull would receive—in the event of such a calamity. Of course, everybody would laugh at him. And you stand to win," she added, with a glance into Harvey's face.

"Yes, by Jove," he muttered, and straightway began to forget Lord Crawshull in the contemplation of his more personal interests. But, taking the public road on his way back to Torrington Place, he had scarcely entered the park when he met his uncle, who, perhaps unconsciously, hastened his steps; this being one of the rare occasions when Lord Crawshull felt actually eager to meet Harvey.

"Well," he demanded, with a fairly successful attempt at calmness, "you have to thank me for a second opportunity of seeing Miss Berkeley this afternoon."

"Unfortunately, I didn't see her."

"Had she gone out?" demanded Lord Crawshull.

"To the Tower House," said Harvey; and as his uncle muttered an oath, he continued, "Grace usually sees the Chalmers girls once or twice a-day, you know."

As Lord Crawshull turned to retrace his steps towards Torrington Place, he devoutly hoped it might be true that Grace had merely strolled over to speak to Agnes or Winifred Chalmers in a casual way.

"By-the-bye," he asked, just outside his door, "about your own prospects, do you imagine you are on the eve of being forgiven?"

"Upon my word, I hope so," answered Harvey.

"Ha!" muttered Lord Crawshull, for he could not blind himself to the fact that if Grace had decided upon Harvey's reinstatement, she had a distinct, personal interest in making mischief between himself and Sophy. Still, she might not succeed, even if she made the attempt. Surely his bride could never draw back, as it were, on the threshold of the church! He had parted from her directly after luncheon at Mrs. Chalmers's, with the understanding that their next meeting would take place at the altar rail the following day, and she had smilingly persisted that she should be far too busy to be bothered by Lord Crawshull again that afternoon.

For one thing, Sophy's wedding-dress had not arrived, although she had received a tele-

gram, in answer to her own, to the effect that it had been despatched by the train which brought Harvey Redford, so that Mrs. Chalmers had sent a man to the station to fetch the box.

Everybody in the house had noticed Sophy's increasing excitement as the hours passed, and after Lord Crawshull's departure that afternoon Mrs. Chalmers had spoken to her quite anxiously.

"It will never do to break down before to-morrow," she urged, after much good advice; "Lord Crawshull would never forgive me."

"You need not be afraid," said Sophy; "I never break down."

"I am sure you ought to be a very happy girl to-day!" Mrs. Chalmers insisted.

"Yes, oughtn't I?" was the answer, and Sophy laughed a little hysterically.

"I wonder how many women envy you!" cried Mrs. Chalmers.

"I—I wonder," said Sophy, and she nervously hummed a tune, oddly enough one that she had not heard for years, and then on a barrel-organ in Drury Lane. Going to her own room, where the floor was covered by half-packed boxes, and the bed was littered with dresses and gloves and hats, she sat down by

the open window, wondering how Acton Marsh was occupied at that precise moment. If he felt able to work to-day he probably had a model sitting. Oh dear! what ages ago it seemed since she used to sit for him! She pictured him in those days, his head hidden, all but the hair, for a few minutes, then his face appearing at one side of the easel—there would never be anybody like him! When she realised her loneliness and helplessness, and his never-failing courtesy, she perceived that this could not have been due to any virtue in herself, but rather to some ingrained goodness of his own; and whatever he might say, Sophy knew that his sole reward was an additional bitterness in his life.

The most astounding thing in the world to her, far exceeding even the wonderful nature of her own rise in the world, was the fact that any woman, however abandoned, having the immense good fortune to be Acton's wife, could deliberately forfeit her claim. Even Sophy's active imagination did not enable her to conceive how Mrs. Marsh could turn upon her husband, and injure him as she had done.

Ah, well, it was useless to murmur against fate, thought Sophy, although, until she said the words under her breath, she had scarcely

realised that her feelings were rebellious this afternoon. She had chosen her course freely, and, of course, there could be no question of even wishing it different. For what was the alternative? Only a renewal of her recent life, as far as she could perceive, and surely, as Mrs. Chalmers insisted, she was a woman to be envied.

It was past four o'clock when Winifred tapped at her door, and entered the bedroom, followed by Agnes and Dawson, who carried a large box containing the wedding-dress. A space having been cleared on the bed the box was opened, and then for several minutes the three girls stood in an admiring group. Dawson spread a sheet over the carpet, shifting one or two of the trunks, a larger pier-glass was fetched from Mrs. Chalmers's room, Sophy took off her morning-frock, and the maid held over her head that which was to be worn to-morrow.

Standing a few minutes later veiled before the glass, Agnes and Winifred expressing enthusiastic admiration, Sophy did not require to be told that she looked her very best in her bridal robes. Winifred on her knees was in the act of arranging the train, when she was disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Don't let any one come in!" she exclaimed

frantically ; and Dawson opened the door about two inches.

"Miss Berkeley wants Miss Chalmers," said the maid, after a few whispered words.

"How Grace would love to see your dress !" cried Agnes.

"Suppose we have her up," suggested Winifred. "If you really don't mind," she added, glancing at Sophy.

"Oh, I don't mind at all."

"Say Miss Berkeley is to come here," cried Agnes ; and after a very short interval, Grace, looking rather pallid and nervous, entered the room. She was received with acclamation, and invited to join the admiring chorus.

"Isn't it lovely ! It fits without a crease ! Do turn round, Sophy !"

While Grace made a valiant effort to say all that was expected, she was wondering how to obtain a private interview with Sophy. She preferred that no one else should have an inkling of her purpose, since it seemed possible that her confidence might not be taken in the best part. For, standing a yard or two from Sophy in bridal array, it became more and more difficult to believe that this was donned with the least regret or reluctance. The girl looked like anything but a victim, and for a

moment Grace went as far as to speculate whether her wisest course would not be to offer some excuse for her visit (she had asked to speak to Agnes Chalmers so that an excuse would be perfectly easy), and to go away from the Tower House with her message undelivered.

"Has Captain Redford arrived?" asked Sophy presently.

"I have just parted from him," said Grace. "He told me something—something that I fancy might interest you."

Sophy's became a tell-tale face now, and Grace began to rejoice that she had not stayed at home.

"Not—not about Mr. Marsh?" cried Sophy.

"Yes, it had something to do with him," was the answer; and Winifred and Agnes exchanged glances.

"If you two good people want to talk secrets we may as well go," said Winifred, although she felt that she should very much like to stay and hear all about it.

"Too bad to turn you out," answered Grace, with tingling cheeks; while Sophy's face had turned as white as her wedding-dress, and as soon as Agnes, Winifred and the maid had left the room, she turned excitedly towards Grace.

"Tell me!" she said; and Grace took her hand, leading her to the sofa at the foot of the bed, where they sat down side by side. Sophy did not realise that she still clung to her companion, nor could she imagine the nature of the imminent news, unless indeed it should be to the effect that Acton had determined not to come to give her away to-morrow. In this event it might be months before she saw him again, but Grace's demeanour led Sophy to suspect that she was on the point of hearing something far more important. Grace, however, did not keep her long in suspense:

"Of course," she began, "you knew that Mr. Marsh was married."

"Why, yes," murmured Sophy; and Grace felt her fingers tighten their grasp.

"His wife is dead!"

Sophy withdrew her hand, pressing it against the orange blossoms at her breast. She seemed to breathe with great difficulty, and for a few moments complete silence reigned in the room.

"Dead!" she whispered, with her eyes rivetted on Grace's face.

"Yes," said Grace, awe-stricken by the solemnity of Sophy's manner.

"When did she die?"

"More than five years ago."

“And—and he didn’t know!”

“He doesn’t know even yet,” answered Grace; and while Sophy sat perfectly still, staring down at her train as it lay on the sheet in front of her, Grace explained how Harvey Redford had brought the news, expecting to find Acton Marsh at Mrs. Berkeley’s house. And when the tale ended, Sophy still sat motionless with her hands pressed to her breast, crumpling the orange blossoms, no word passing her lips, no indication of the effect which the announcement was likely to have on her conduct.

“I—I thought you would be interested to hear,” said Grace, rising presently; and Sophy also stood upright, gazing into her face. Grace seemed to be held by the unfathomable expression of her eyes, and until that instant she told herself she had not realised the full force of Sophy’s attractiveness.

“It was good of you to tell me,” murmured Sophy. “I shall never forget it. I—I hope you will be very happy, and that you will make Captain Redford happy.”

Sophy remained dry-eyed, but Grace could scarcely see as she made her way downstairs, and so, without meeting Agnes or Winifred, out of the house. With her neck bent, she walked

along the country lane towards home; but before she had advanced many yards she saw Harvey spring off a gate as he threw away the end of a cigarette.

"So you have been spreading the news!" he exclaimed, falling in by her side.

"I couldn't let her be married without knowing," said Grace, trusting that this was actually her predominant motive, but nevertheless feeling not a little guilty.

"How did she take it?"

"Without a word; I haven't the remotest idea how it will influence her."

"Will it have any effect at all?" he demanded. "Does she think it is of the least importance?"

"You would not ask me that," answered Grace, "if you had looked into her eyes——"

"Grace," he exclaimed hastily, for Harvey had more than once enjoyed such an opportunity, "there's only one question I want to ask you. I know I treated you abominably. I don't offer the slightest excuse——"

"Will you tell me one thing with absolute honesty?" she asked, and he replied with a reproachful glance.

"I have almost ceased to marvel that she infatuated you——"

"What has she done to bewitch you?" demanded Harvey.

"Nothing. But with all her faults it is difficult even for me to resist her. I almost understand your fascination, but I should like you to tell me frankly whether or not you have entirely got over it."

"I'm not brute enough to ask you to marry me if I—if I still felt like that," he said. "She treated me with supreme contempt. When I heard she was going to marry my uncle, that settled the question. The girl is an arrant adventuress."

"Oh, I won't deny that there's something of the adventuress in her," cried Grace.

"And you are hoping now that she will do a shameful thing!"

Grace faced Harvey abruptly as they walked along the lane.

"Aren't you?" she asked.

"Enough of her, anyhow," he exclaimed. "Grace, you are going to be magnanimous?"

"I am afraid I am going to be weak," she said. "But it—it happens that I love you, and I suppose you know it."

CHAPTER XXIII

A LETTER FOR LORD CRAWSHULL

SOPHY's face was pale, her movements were slow and deliberate; she no longer looked in the glass as she passed it with her long white train sweeping the floor. Ringing the bell, she sent Dawson for Winifred, who came with consuming curiosity.

"Is anything the matter?" she cried.

"Mrs. Marsh is dead!" said Sophy. "I want you to send for Lord Crawshull."

"Sophy——"

"Oh, please send at once. I can't bear the waiting!"

"But what reason shall I give?" asked Winifred, filled with sudden alarm.

"Say I must speak to him, immediately. Say anything so that he comes; and," added Sophy, as Winifred turned towards the door, "would you mind asking Dawson to help me off with this dress."

Winifred felt that the transaction promised

to become too momentous for her own unaided management. Scenting trouble, she went to Mrs. Chalmers, explaining in excited language that Grace had brought the news of Mrs. Marsh's death, and that Sophy demanded Lord Crawshull's immediate presence.

"Well," said Mrs. Chalmers, "this is Sophy's hour. Whatever she bids him do to-day will doubtless be done."

"But, mother," cried Winifred, "you don't understand. She is quite likely to decline to be married to-morrow."

"Nonsense!" was the answer; "the triumphal arches are finished; the Bishop must have reached Torrington Place by this time. You must be mad to suggest such a thing."

"Wouldn't it be — exciting?" exclaimed Winifred, at a loss for a sufficiently expressive word.

"Exciting!" said her mother. "It would be the most disgraceful act I ever imagined. If anything of the kind were to happen in this house, I should have to move. I should be ashamed to show my face in the village."

While Winifred went to enlighten Agnes, Mrs. Chalmers wrote a carefully-worded letter to Lord Crawshull, despatching it to Tor-

ington Place by a groom, with instructions that it was to be delivered at once.

A quarter of an hour later it reached Lord Crawshull's hands. At the moment he was surrounded by his guests at afternoon tea in the hall. Before the empty fireplace, he stood talking to the recently arrived Bishop of Bonchester, but, recognising Mrs. Chalmers's crest on the envelope, Lord Crawshull made an apology, and carried his letter to the small library, where, with a shaky hand, he broke the seal.

Sinking into a chair he sat tapping the sheet of paper with his finger-tips, trying to persuade himself that it was only some whim of Sophy's which commanded him in this erratic manner. He felt prepared to grovel at her feet to-day, and but a few minutes passed before he rang for his hat and stick. Setting forth with dismal forebodings, he passed beneath the evergreen arches in the park and attempted to rally his spirits. It became far easier to curse Grace Berkeley, and, by way of complement, Harvey, but for whose meddlesomeness the present emergency might not have arisen.

It was useless to pretend that it was not an emergency, while he fretted at his own impotence. If Sophy elected to throw him over, it was entirely beyond his ability to prevent

her. He saw himself a public laughing-stock ; the story would find its way into the newspapers, though indeed this were comparatively a minor evil. He was received in the drawing-room where he had bidden Sophy good-bye, (not expecting to see her again until he stood at the altar to-morrow), and Mrs. Chalmers began a profuse apology for bringing him away from his guests.

"But Sophy insisted," she said, with a smile. "Even after I had written the letter I went to her room to try to dissuade her, but she refused to see me."

"Perhaps," answered Lord Crawshull sharply, "you will allow her to see me now I am here."

"I have already sent to tell her," cried Mrs. Chalmers bridling, and the door opened as she spoke.

Sophy looked so greatly changed since either Mrs. Chalmers or Lord Crawshull had seen her a little while ago, that both felt somewhat appalled. She advanced into the room without any attempt at a greeting, her hands hanging by her sides. She wore a simple, dark serge frock, the only portion of her former wardrobe which she had thought it worth while to bring to Torrington, and she had divested herself of every article of jewellery. The rings were

removed from her fingers, her watch and chain had gone, there was no brooch at her neck. She saw Lord Crawshull in the middle of the room, with his hands clasped behind him, the droop in his shoulders more than usually noticeable. Stopping between him and her hostess Sophy glanced significantly and gravely at Mrs. Chalmers, who swept out of the room with her head in the air.

"I am going to treat you very badly," said Sophy, motionless before Lord Crawshull; and her simple apparel seemed to impart a fresh attractiveness. If the half of his fortune would have tempted her to treat him well he would have sacrificed it at that moment.

"Is that what I deserve?" he muttered, taking a step towards her with his hands still behind his back.

"No, you deserve something far different," she admitted; "but I can't marry you."

"Sophy," he said, drawing a step nearer, "you don't realise what you are saying."

"Oh yes, I do."

"Think of it," he urged. "Every preparation is made. Only a few hours ago we parted to meet at the church to-morrow."

"I didn't know that Mrs. Marsh was dead," she answered.

"Does the knowledge justify you in playing the jilt?" he demanded.

"No, nothing can justify me," she explained. "I promised to be your wife, and I ought to keep my word. But I did not deceive you. You must have understood. Still I promised, and I ought to do it——"

"You will," he said, raising his voice. "You must—by God, you shall."

Sophy slowly shook her head.

"I am perfectly free," she answered; "no one can compel me."

"Sophy," he pleaded, "only imagine to what you condemn me! Try to realise how I have counted on you. I swear you shall never have a wish ungratified——"

"I understand what I am giving up," she said quietly.

"Things you seemed to value!"

"Yes," she cried; "but then, don't you understand, I believed that Mrs. Marsh was alive and now I know she is dead, and I am going home—I am going to-night."

"You imagine you will find a welcome?"

"Ah—yes," said Sophy; and Lord Crawshull grew furious when he saw the confident expression of her tempting face.

"Your name will become a byword," he

retorted; "men will use it to express the extreme of falseness."

"Whatever they say, I shall deserve," she admitted. "But it is of no use to talk any longer. I feel terribly tired! I know I am acting disgracefully——"

"You would be—infernally disgracefully," he said; "but you won't! Sophy, you were to have become my wife in a few hours," he urged, and Lord Crawshull saw her irrepresible shudder. "Marsh will only despise you," he continued. "No man values a woman who throws herself at his head. If he took you from me, he could never look the world in the face again."

"He wouldn't take me," she exclaimed. "He would not have told me his wife was dead. He would say it was dishonourable."

"He would not be far wrong," said Lord Crawshull.

"He will hate what I am doing, but he won't hate *me*! He would stand by and let me marry you. He would have come to give me to you to-morrow—I know him so well. But I will not let him," cried Sophy, and Lord Crawshull had never desired her with such ardour. "When I heard what had happened—all those years ago—I did not hesitate. Not

for a moment. As I sat listening to Miss Berkeley I did not seem to need to make up my mind. I knew at once. I understood how he would act, and I saw that I must go to him——”

“At the risk of ruining my life!”

“At any risk,” she insisted. “I am ashamed of myself while I stand here telling you this, and I am sorry for you!”

“Damn your sorrow!” shouted Lord Crawshull, stamping on the carpet in his rage. Sophy winced and bowed her head as if she had received a blow. She would not indeed have felt surprised if he had struck her, as he stood glaring into her face, and for the moment she did not think she should greatly have cared. She admitted that she was treating him disgracefully, and while she became dimly conscious that she was escaping something more terrible than she had imagined, she thought that she deserved whatever Lord Crawshull might do or say. “Damn your sorrow!” he shouted again; and then walking to the door, he opened it, left the room, and set forth to Torrington Place.

He did not desire any expression of sympathy, however truly it might be deserved. Nothing would have increased his annoyance

more surely than commiseration. In a manner he found momentary distraction in the necessity to deal with the situation in the village. Tomorrow's fête must obviously be postponed. His guests must be dispersed. He, himself, perceived the desirability of getting away from Torrington at the very earliest opportunity.

Although it seemed detestable to invoke Harvey Redford's aid, there was nobody to whom he could conveniently turn in his necessity. Lord Crawshull summoned his nephew to the small library, and, stating the case in a few bald words, implored him to make as few explanations as possible, to get rid of the people, including the Bishop of Bonchester, early the following morning, and in the meantime to keep them all out of the way. Then Lord Crawshull ordered his dinner to be served apart, and none but the servants saw his face again that day. The bishop, it is true, appeared eager to offer condolence, but he would certainly have been scandalised to have heard Lord Crawshull's reply to his proposition.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

As soon as Dr. Renshaw and his wife recovered from the state of collapse consequent on their interview with Harvey Redford on Tuesday, they turned their thoughts with one accord to self-preservation. Having conspired to commit a crime, they were now brought face to face with the most alarming possibilities. Mrs. Renshaw advised immediate flight, especially as the cessation of income from Acton Marsh would in any event compel the sale of their house and furniture. But her husband insisted that in no case could they succeed in hiding themselves from the myrmidons of the law, whereas, if they were to throw themselves on Marsh's mercy, he might conceivably stay his hand. In the circumstances, he could not avoid a feeling of intense relief on hearing of his wife's death, and perhaps this might dispose him towards pardon. It was Mrs. Renshaw, for once, who suggested

that the doctor should travel to London and pay Marsh a visit as closely as possible on Captain Redford's heels, but after considerable wrangling and vituperation the question remained undetermined at bedtime on Tuesday night.

But directly after breakfast on Wednesday morning, a sheet of ruled foolscap was bought, and Dr. Renshaw sat down to indite a long letter, in which a clean breast was made of everything. This was posted in due course, and handed to Acton at half-past seven the same evening.

On receiving the oblong envelope, with the Blytheswold postmark, Acton wondered what could lead Renshaw to write to him so long before the next payment was due. The notion of Mrs. Marsh's death did not enter his thoughts, however, and when he had read a few lines he looked about the studio with a dazed kind of expression, as if unable to grasp the full purport of the news.

"You will have heard from Captain Redford," Acton read, "of the lamentable error of judgment into which, under stress of strong temptation, I allowed myself to be betrayed." Acton, however, had heard no word from Harvey, whom he had not seen since his departure from London some weeks ago.

Glancing again at the closely written page, he soon put himself in possession of all the facts. He knew now that his wife had lain in the grave for longer than five years, and that during that time Renshaw had paid him frequent visits, taking his hand, and assuring him that Mrs. Marsh was perfectly well.

With some difficulty Acton perceived the irony of fate. At any time since Sophy's return from Brussels (or before, for that matter), he might without let or hindrance have made her his wife. All the restraint which he had put upon himself, and God only knew what it had cost, had been wasted. But for Renshaw's rascality, Sophy need never have seen Lord Crawshull. The revelation seemed the more painfully tantalising, inasmuch as she was not yet Crawshull's wife, while Acton was faced by the necessity to go to Torrington early to-morrow morning to give her away. And he might have kept her! His thoughts roamed to an imaginary future; he could not abstain from picturing what might have been, while nothing appeared more certain than that it now could never come to pass. In his present mood he could not consider the monetary aspect of the fraud; but apart from that, surely no man had ever been much more

cruelly wronged. Of revenge he did not think; the Renshaws might go their own way for him, since nothing could remove the consequences of their act.

Nothing! Acton felt assured of that. He should not see Sophy until the time came to accompany her from the Tower House to church, and then, during the few minutes' drive, what would be gained by her enlightenment. Then Acton began to try to account for Harvey Redford's non-appearance, and it was not very difficult to conclude that he had gone to Torrington with the expectation of finding him at Mrs. Berkeley's house.

The gong sounded, and he went incongruously to dinner, sitting tongue-tied opposite Mrs. Wormauld, while his spirit rebelled. Could any path really prove worse for Sophy than that which she was on the point of treading? Because the circumstances had entirely changed since the day she promised to marry Lord Crawshull. Yet Acton could not succeed in persuading himself that there existed an alternative. He could not attempt to take her from Lord Crawshull, even though such an act might redound to her infinite advantage. Moreover, it appeared at least uncertain that she would be willing to come.

Unconscious of what he ate and of Mrs. Wormauld's questioning glances, Acton warned himself that he had observed Sophy too carefully to be blind to some of her defects. His gorge rose at the thought that she had been capable of placing herself in Crawshull's hands—for a consideration. He would rather she had gotten to a nunnery, giving herself to no man, since she could not properly come to him she loved. For he knew that she loved him—she had given evidence of that on her last morning beneath his roof, if never before. He remembered, however, her delight at the prospect of becoming "my lady"; he remembered many a weakness and defect, and he startled Mrs. Wormauld by suddenly rising from his chair, leaving the room, and hastening to his studio. There he threw up his arms, and cursed in his agony the fate which had brought him news of liberty too late to be of the slightest value.

He wandered about the house with Captain at his heels, and, taking care that no prying eyes were near, even opened the door of Sophy's room. The small bed was not dismantled; on the dressing-table there still remained one or two knickknacks which she had been wont to use. Going downstairs

again, he entered his smoking-room, and stood leaning against the mantel-shelf, picturing her as she used to stand a yard away, seeming to hear her voice again, writhing when he thought of the different *dénouement* to which such interviews might have led. Looking at his watch presently, Acton saw that it was ten, and sitting down, he lighted a pipe, resting his left hand on Captain's head.

Had Sophy by any chance heard the news? Harvey would be certain to enlighten Grace Berkeley, and perhaps Lord Crawshull—an interesting topic for the dinner-table, in fact! Crawshull assuredly would keep his own converse, whereas Grace appeared almost equally unlikely to pass on the information.

But suppose that Sophy had learned the truth! That she could dream of recoiling at the eleventh hour seemed to be the wildest of suppositions. Yet there had ever been something in her character which eluded calculation. The beneficent influence of tobacco encouraged the building of air castles. He told himself he was almost as bad as Sophy! Of course it would be a shameful act—to throw Lord Crawshull over; but, good heavens! suppose she were to do it! Suppose she were to wash her hands of

Crawshull, and then to come back to Ivanoff Road free——

“What is it, Captain, old man?”

The dog's ears were pricked. He emitted a low growl. There was the sound of wheels outside the house, a loud bark within, as Captain rose and approached the door. There were footsteps in the hall as Acton turned the handle.

“Sophy!” he cried, the next moment, and she advanced towards him, pale, weary, anxious, with her arms outstretched.

“I have come home again,” she said.

Acton took her hands, leading her into his room.

THE END



